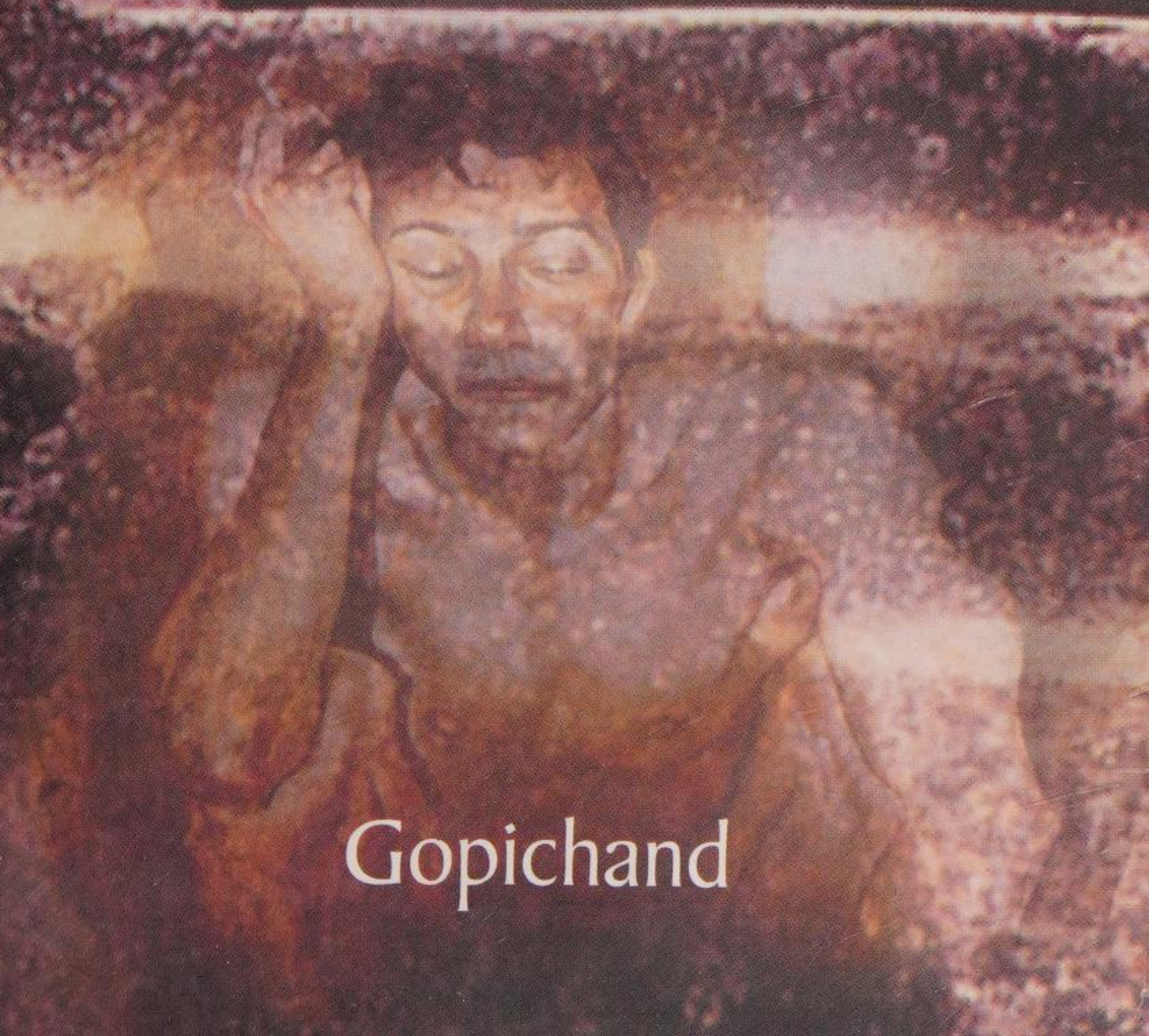
SAHITYA AKADEMI AWARD WINNER

# The Bungler

*a journey through life*



Gopichand

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*The bungler*, originally written in Telugu and published in 1947 as *Asamardhuni Jeevayatra*, written by T. Gopichand was at a time of personal despondency and national turmoil. Gopichand created a unique anti-hero in this novel, Sitaram Rao is a well-educated, wealthy, feudal landlord, who delights in helping others and settles huge debts for petty repayments. Soon he becomes impoverished, and expects gratitude and help in return for the help he has rendered earlier, in vain. His grudge against the world leads him alternately to philosophical discource, a rationalist path and finally an existentialist bend. His split personality advocates now one point of view, and then its exact opposite. The novelist achieves the interiorization of the outer and the externalization of the inner world of a character as no one has ever done before him in Telugu literature.

Gopichand subverts many icons of his time. His mouthpiece, Grandfather Ramayya posits a postcolonial possibility, of harnessing knowledge to improve the quality of life. In this tightly crafted short novel, it is remarkable because it foreshadows early attempts at magic realism in Telugu and anticipates the discource of the absurd as seen in the work of Marquez, Grass, Kundera, Okri and Rushdie.

# *The Bungler*

A Journey Through Life

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A Journey Through Life

a novel by

Gopichand

Translated
from the original Telugu by
D. S. Rao

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*Asamardhuni Jivayatra*

the original Telugu edition
first published in 1947
was dedicated by Gopichand to
'Father
who taught me to question "Why?"'

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# Introduction

The Telugu Novel is 125 years old, but the term 'novel' was used in Telugu for the first time in 1847 – 25 years after its birth – when Kasibhatta Brahmayya Sastri published his *Vivekachandrika Vimarsanam*, attacking Kandukuri Viresalingam's *Rajasekhara Charitra or Vivekachandrika*, pointing out that it was not a prose treatise but a novel after the English models and declaring that henceforth he would call such works novels. And thus the term "novel" came to be used in Telugu and gradually gained acceptability. Earlier, the novel in Telugu had been called a prose treatise for a quarter-century. There is, however, difference of opinion about the first novel in Telugu.

In 1872, the Madras Gazette noticed Narahari Gopalakrishnamma Setty's *Sri Rangaraja Charitra or Sonabai Parinayam* as the first novel in Telugu, but the author himself had called it *navina prabandham*, a "new treatise". Some scholars hold this as the first novel Telugu and some others trace it to even an earlier date and assign it to Kokkonda Vankata Ratnam's *Mahasveta*, written in 1867 but published later in parts. (Scholarship has since established it to be a translation of the Mahasveta episode in *Kadambari*.) There are also scholars who take it as far back as the 16th century, citing Pingali Suranna's *Kalapurnodaymu* as the first Telugu novel: though written in verse, interspersed with prose, it has all the elements of a novel, and if Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*, written in English in

the 20th century, all in verse, is a novel, why not *Kalapurnodayamu* be classified so?

However, Akkiraju Ramapati Rao[1] finds *Sri Rangaraja Charita* as an original work and the first attempt at writing a novel in Telugu. It portrays the manners, beliefs, customs and conventions of the castes and classes in Andhra, and had no doubt influenced Viresalingam's *Rajasekhara Charitra or Vivekachandrika*, published serially in the monthly *Vivekavardhini*, 1878. Some scholars consider *Rajasekhara Charitra* as the first novel in Telugu.[2] Viresalingam had begun translating Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, abandoned it, and then proceeded to write his own novel, and

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*1. Telugu Navala* (Hyderabad: Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi, 1975); a brief but excellent exposition of the birth and growth of the Telugu novel.

2. Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. VIII, *1800-1910, Western Impact: Indian Responses* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi 1991); an invaluable seminal work; the reader may be interested in the appearance of the first novels in other Indian languages: Marathi, 1857, Baba Padamanji's *Yamuna Paryatan*, on the decadence of Hinduism and the need for widow-marriage; Bengali, 1858, Tekchand Thakur's *Alaler Gharer Dulal*, on 'the condition of the Hindu society, manners, customs, etc'; English, 1864, Bankim Chandra's *Rajmohan's Wife*, on domestic life; Gujarati, 1866, Nandashankar Tilijashankar Mehta's *Karan Ghelo*, about the last Hindu king of Gujarat; Urdu, 1869, Nazir Ahmad's *Miratul Urus*, a tale of two sisters; Assamese, 1876, Hemchandra Barua's *Bahire rang cang aru bhitare kova bhaturi*, a pungent satire on religious hypocrisy; Tamil, 1879, Samuel Vedanayakam Pillai's *Piratapa Mutaliyar Carittaram or The Life and Adventures of Prathapa Mudaliar*, 'to give practical illustration of the maxims of morality'; Hindi, 1882, Srinivasa Das's *Pariksha Guru*, about the life of the upper middleclass; Oriya, 1888, Umesh Chandra Sarkar's *Padmamali*, a historical romance; Sindhi, 1890, Mirza Qalich Beg's *Zinat*, the story of a middleclass Muslim family; Kannda, 1892, Lakshmana Rao Gadagkar's *Suryakanta*, about a poor family in the eighteenth century Karnataka; Punjabi, 1898, Bhai Vir Singh's *Sundri*, about the Sikh resistance of the Mughal tyranny. From social and religious reform to a wistful look into the past about sums up the range of the Indian novelist in the second half of the last century.

this perhaps is the reason for resemblances between the two. A decade later, Chandu Menon too did a similar thing in Kerala: he considered translating Benjamin Disaraeli's *Henriette Temple*, gave up the idea and instead wrote "a Malayalam novel more or less after the English fashion" – *Indulekha* (1889), weaving social reform and individual freedom into a love story, the first novel in the deep south.

Viresalingam's *Satyavati Charitra* (1883) is the first thesis novel in Telugu. The novelist probes four kinds of alliance: an educated husband and his illiterate wife; an educated wife and her illiterate husband; both illiterate; both educated. The author shows that an ideal marriage is where both are educated. His *Satyaraja Poorvadesa Yatralu* was modelled after Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and made such an impact on his readers that some of them wrote to him asking for the address of Satyaraja!

The Telugu love for novel-writing competitions can be traced back to 1893, when *Chintamani*, a literary monthly, began such a contest and ran it for six years. In 1894, Chilakamarti Lakshminarasimham won the first prize for his *Ramachandra Vijayam*, wrote later several historical novels and was hailed as the Andhra Scott. The contribution of these competitions to the development of Telugu novel is immense.

Thus the last quarter of the last century is the period of the pioneers in Telugu novel.[3] Contact with the west released the

3. Some significant novelists of this period, apart from those already mentioned, are Khandavalli Ramachandrudu, Tallapragada Suryanarayana, Goteti Kanakaraju and Tekumalla Rajagopala Rao.

twin forces of reformism and revivalism, and the pioneering novelist veered between them. Mythological, historical and sociological themes were explored.

In the early twentieth century, adaptations and translations from Bengali and English began to appear, along with pure thrillers. Soon the novel established itself as the most popular literary form and attracted some of the best writers. Novelists looked into the past, recreated the bygone glory and roused patriotic fervour for the freedom struggle. And as Independence drew closer, political discourse and philosophical speculation found their way in, along with the stream of consciousness and psychonalysis. While Viswanadha Satyanarayana wrote over fifty novels, mostly revivalist and didactic but strong on the story line and highly engaging, Gudipati Venkata Chalam ridiculed some of the earlier masters and, in his own work, exposed man's meanness, delusion and exploitation of woman. But the most remarkable novel of the pre-Independence India,[4] and in the opinion of some, of the 20th century, is Vunnava Lakshminarayana's *Malapalli* (1921). This novel was written in prison and, when published the British Government promptly banned it and confiscated all the copies. The novel has been hailed for its realism, vivid characterisation and the

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4. Some of the noted novelists of this period, apart from those already mentioned, are Komarraju Lakshmana Rao, Bhogaraju Narayana Murthy, Ketavarapu Venkata Sastri, Duggirala Raghavachandrayya, Malladi Ramakrishna Sastri, Sripada Subrahmanya Sastri, Adivi Bapiraju, Nori Narasimha Sastri, Kodvatiganti Kutumba Rao, Palagummi Padmaraju, Buchchi babu and G.V. Krishna Rao.

use of language actually spoken.

A noteworthy feature of the post-Independence Telugu novel is the rise of the woman-novelist. [5] She virtually ruled the periodical press with serialisation. Men were by no means elbowed out and continued to write some very good novels in Telugu. [6]

The major thematic concerns of the women-novelists are tradition and modernity, village and city, marriage and family, caste and class, love and happiness, innocence and experience; those of the men-novelists are search for identity, individual and society, freewill and predetermination, myths and legends, women's education and domestic harmony, frigidity and lesbianism.

These trends are not exhaustive but only indicative. Similarly, names of the novels and novelists mentioned in this survey are selective, and for every one cited, two or more can be cited with equal justification. In any case, names may not mean much for the non-Telugu reader, for whom this brief overview is meant.

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5. Some of the prominent names are Malladi Vasundhara, P Sridevi, Malati Chendur, Muppala Ranganayakamma, Bina Devi, Vasireddi Sitadevi, Illindala Saraswati, Koduri Kausalya Devi, Yeddanapudi Sulochana Rani, Latha, Madireddi Sulochana and Dwivedula Visalakshi.

6. Rachakonda Viswanatha Sastri, Mahidhara Rammohana Rao, Uppala Lakshmana Rao, Tenneti Suri, Balivada Kantha Rao, Bhaskarabhatla Krishna Rao, Kommuri Venugopal, Vattikota Alwaraswamy, and Gollapudi Maruti Rao are some of the important novelists of the post-Independence era.

## II

1947 marks the Independence of India, as also the partition of the country; freedom from alien tyranny, as also the reality of self-rule; departure of the whitelord, as also the rise of the blackguard; the mass euphoria, as also the intellectual disillusionment, weakness of the good, as also the power of evil ... Not that there are no areas of grey, and in fact it is such indeterminate zones that the creative writer explores.

Gopichand is one such writer, and this his second novel, *The Bungler* (*Asamardhuni Jivayatra*), was published in 1947. Written in a severely simple style at a time of personal despondency and national turmoil, when all values were simmering in a cauldron, Gopichand created a unique anti-hero in Telugu literature – Sitarama Rao.

Structure and subject mingle extremely well in *The Bungler*; philosophical discourse about man's place in the universe blends with an apparently humdrum tale of a well-meaning good-for-nothing. The novel begins and ends with death, the father's on the first page and the son's on the last; in between preoccupation with existence and means of sustenance.

The novelist loses no time in telling us of the downfall of Sitarama Rao from the wealthy, benevolent landlord to the blundering, poor householder. Food, scarce in the opening chapter, continues to be so in the second, but Sitarama Rao's wife somehow manages the housekeeping. Sitarama Rao's dream, in which food again is the central concern, is a brilliant

device to depict his split personality: an atheist doing penance and invoking Siva, the Lord of Destruction, for sustenance, for food. Of the Hindu Trinity, Brahma is the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver and Siva, the Destroyer. Sitarama Rao does not invoke the first two, but the third who presides over the cremation ground.

The atheist anti-hero visualises Siva as Ardhanariswar – half-woman half-man in one body – with a black partition cloth covering one while the other speaks, as in *Veedhibhagotam*, the once popular street-entertainment of the Andhra. Even as he is being fed by celestial beauties, the tragicomic dream ends with his daughter's waking him up. And he is reluctant to get up because the moment he wakes, his wife will say, there is no rice in the house, no lentils, no vegetables. But the atheist must rationalise and a full section is devoted to food, international conferences on food, politics of food, including a dig at communism; and then his own colloquy with his friends, concluding on a typical existentialist note of futility of all action.

In the next chapter, the omniscient narrative gives place to the epistolary technique, with another point of view emerging. Sitarama Rao says he has helped his uncle not in foolishness but out of generosity; his uncle, however, makes out a convincing case against Sitarama Rao. The double view shows Sitarama Rao's innocence, foolishness and arrogance, as also his uncle's hurt, manipulation and retaliation. Here too food continues to haunt: the worst insult to the uncle was that he

was not allowed to eat with the family. Food is shown not only as the sustainer but also as the divider.

The last two chapters are examples of technical excellence. A crow dives and kicks at Sitarama Rao's head; an erikala woman's complaint makes him strike his daughter and towards the end of the fifth chapter, he hits his wife. And this hitting his own wife drives him on the downward gradient. What leads him to it again is food: sorry for having struck his daughter, Sitarama Rao makes up with her; resolves to confide in his wife, and win back her love and respect which he thinks (mistakenly though) he has lost; makes a special effort to be extra nice to her at meals, fails and leaves his food in a huff; returns, eats and broods; fears his wife has jumped into the well and killed herself; when he finds she has not, holds her responsible for his own torment and hits her.

After hitting his wife, Sitarama Rao looks at his wedding photograph on the wall and finds it funny, another photograph of his wife disgusting, and wonders how he had once loved her at all. And this leads him to his diary, and here the novelist gives us glimpses of a very tender, youthful, romantic Sitarama Rao. This is irony at its most tragic. Sitarama Rao marries the girl he has loved, raises a family, and now considers her as the cause of his ruin, hates her, hits her – the story is commonplace; but it becomes uncommon in Gopichand's hands, for the novelist moves from the outer world to the inner turmoil of Sitarama Rao, from the lofty to the ludicrous, from the sublime

to the pathetic.

Sitarama Rao goes to Grandfather Ramayya, who calls him mad. Cut to the quick, he tries to show up people as they really are: by song, by harangue, by talk, by implication, by exposure. His road-speech from a police-post is a fine instance of oversimplifying profound world-views, a devotee's despair at the failure of his deities. Humanism gives him a little respite. In a devastating satire, Gopichand makes Sitarama Rao and his friends hail a prostitute as Mother Andhra, who has contained in herself the filth of the society, even as Lord Siva held the poison in his throat. The corrosive satire turns into a haunting question in the cremation ground: does it matter whether the dead woman is a prostitute or a paragon?

From the redlight district, Sitarama Rao goes to the public meeting: is he moving from the scene of open prostitution to the scene of veiled fornication of the willing public? The overwrought Sitarama Rao can't take it anymore. Gopichand's cast of politicians anticipates the post-Independence scenario, with a swami and all. His understanding of the mob mind is comparable to Shakespeare's, but his Sitarama Rao is no Mark Antony. Sitarama Rao's haughty diatribe leads to his own undoing: as long as he exposes the leaders on the stage, the crowd roars and applauds; but when he abuses and attacks the crowd, the crowd gives it back to him. Sitarama Rao is beaten up.

After this tempestuous public meeting comes a quiet section

where the novelist's mouthpiece Grandfather Ramayya traces the social evolution, advising Sitarama Rao to use his learning, not for asserting the futility of all action (as the existentialists do) but for forging a better path. The storm in Sitarama Rao is lulled for a while, only to rage again.

The last section marks the beginnings of magic realism in Telugu fiction. As Sitarama Rao sympathises with the father of the dead harlot, he seems to have regained his humanism. He reflects on the certainty of death. Then why the angst? The burning pyre of the harlot appears to declare she lived happily; the nearby samadhi of an unhappy woman sobs. He moves to the place where his father was cremated, and finds there nothing but weeds: the man had begotten Sitarama Rao, and after death he has begotten these weeds. Sitarama Rao finds that one of the weeds has called him brother. His own shadow claims to be the real Sitarama Rao and he himself the shadow. The personality split is externalised. He is face to face with his own likeness, a frightful likeness despised by his son; his grandson kept away from him, his own wife indifferent to the excruciating pain of his likeness. He engages his wraith in a mortal combat and kills himself. Sitarama Rao has no sons, only two daughters, but he fancies his wraith having a son and grandson. The tricks the mind plays are boggling indeed. Thus, a 'fantastic situation' is 'realistically realised', to borrow the Webster Encyclopaedia definition of magic realism, *a la* Gogol ('Nose') and Tolstoy ('Porcelain Doll'). In this he anticipates

the later and better-known novelists of magic realism: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Gunter Grass, Milan Kundera and Ben Okri. Gopichand achieves the interiorisation of the outer, and the externalisation of the inner world of a character, as no one has ever done before in Telugu literature.

The structure of the novel is reinforced by recurring imagery. The dog is a symbol of loyalty, as also of servitude. Sitarama Rao feeds a dog and the dog guards the house; the dog sleeps in his bed; the dog keeps him company at the cremation ground; the dog turns into his own wraith. Sitarama Rao tells his uncle that a dog is more grateful than he is; his uncle wonders who cares to be a dog! Sitarama Rao thinks his own wife is like a dog, servile even if illtreated.

Like Thomas Hardly, Gopichand might well have called the story of Sitarama Rao, 'a story of a man of character'; living life on his own terms, breaking but not bending before the ruthless powers, Sitarama Rao reaches the tragic heights of a Michael Henchard.

Sitarama Rao is a well-educated, wealthy, feudal, generous landlord. He delights in helping others and settles huge debts for petty repayments. When Grandfather Ramayya advises him to be prudent, he declares that whatever he has been doing, he has been, for the sake of doing, not with any desire. This almost sounds like the desireless action of the *Bhagavad Gita*. That it was not so Sitarama Rao realises when he is impoverished. He expects gratitude, help in return for the help he has earlier

rendered. He bears a grudge against the world. He retires to philosophical discourse, takes a rationalist path, reaches an existentialist bend and declares: 'We are born for no reason; if we can live without one, we'll, else we die!' He knows he needs food for existence and is almost obsessed with it; he does not, in fact, he cannot, earn his own living; will not tolerate wrongdoing in high places but can do precious little about it; sympathises with the world's oldest profession. The constant conflict between good and evil in his own person turns him into a split personality, now advocating one point of view, then its exact opposite. As he fails to understand life, he ends his own.

His father is thrilled that Sitarama Rao has taken after him ('Will a kitten be born to a tiger?'); but after death the father rails at the son and says the son has taken after his maternal uncle! His mother is sad that Sitarama Rao has taken after his father, and after death, in the cremation ground, she is glad he has been changing! His maternal uncle finds Sitarama Rao has taken after his father, insolence, lunacy and all. Sitarama Rao himself first idolises his father and later blames him for his own ruin. Sitarama Rao's wife, however, considers her husband a great man!

Grandfather Ramayya says Sitarama Rao has gone made, and certainly he has good reasons to say so then. But if Grandfather Ramayya thinks Sitarama Rao has really gone mad, will he be lecturing to him on epistemology? No one talks

philosophy to a lunatic. Moreover, Sitarama Rao's mind now seems clearer than ever before: he thinks 'the world moves from animalism to spiritualism, from spiritualism to materialism. It is true that there are men belonging to each of these three stages in this world.'

Or, the three *gunas – tamas, satv, rajas* – to use the Bhagavad Gita terminology. He may well have said that all these three are there in everyone. This recalls Prajapati's advice to men, gods and demons in the *Brihadaranyaka: Datta, Damyata, Dayadhvam.* There is something of the human, the divine and the devlish in everyone.

Can one, who can think with such startling clarity, be a lunatic? Or, were they 'lucid intervals', in psychiatric terminology? But then how to explain Sitarama Rao's doodling his father-in-law's caricature in the firm's account book? Or his talking to a gecko on the wall? Or his confronting a well-dressed gentleman on the road and insisting that he must visualise himself in his birthday suit? Or his asking the hotel proprietor whether the sun will rise in the west if he pays four annas instead of five? Or his cartoons and captions? Probably, such urges lie submerged in the subconscious or are consciously suppressed; if the subconscious in unguarded moments is revealed, most will appear mad. Gopichand has succeeded in probing the wonder of the mind.

R. S. Sudarsanam has made an excellent biographical study

of *Asamardhuni Jivayatra (The Bungler)* in his essay on Gopichand in *Sahityamlo Drikpathalu*. He finds Gopichand took a good look at himself in creating Sitarama Rao. Sitarama Rao was Gopichand's own reflection, a reflection he did not like. That is why he was able both to identify with it and distance himself from it. Gopichand's father, Ramaswamy Chaudhury, was a hierophant of rationalism in Andhra. Gopichand was naturally influenced by it, but as he grew he came to realise its limitations. The death of his father left a void in his life and he was able to overcome it by writing this novel. *The Bungler* is in fact the life of a rationalist. If rationalism remains an intellectual attitude, there is no harm; one can mould it to lived life. Normally an enquirer or a thinker will do so. But if it becomes a poisonous weed in the psyche of an individual, it destroys him. And that is what happens to Sitarama Rao. No doubt, Sudarsanam's biographical approach has its insights.

But, it is perhaps advisable to consider *The Bungler* not as a novel of rationalism, not even of existentialism or of the absurd, but of naturalism, as developed by Emile Zola. According to J.A. Cuddon, naturalism 'should be used to describe works of literature which use realistic methods and subjects to convey a philosophical form of naturalism; that is, a belief that everything that exists is a part of nature and can be explained by natural and material causes, and not by supernatural, spiritual or paranormal causes.' Gopichand does

not rely on the supernatural; rather, he makes fun of it. His realistic portrayal of the life of his anti-hero does not admit of anything non-rational. Deviation is assessed *vis-à-vis* the norm. Gopichand's method is clinical, psychoanalytical. He shows Sitarama Rao's life and actions are determined by his 'heredity and environment'. He dissects and performs 'an autopsy on life'. In doing so, Gopichand subverts the dominant eurocentric icon of his time, Marxism, and debunks the postwar discourse of existentialism and absurdism. His mouthpiece, Grandfather Ramayya, posits a postcolonial possibility, of harnessing knowledge to improve the quality of life, without any colonial or neocolonial hangovers of superiority, intellectual or other.

## III

As I was translating this novel, a friend asked me, didn't I know that it was a copy of Gorki's novel? No, I didn't and queried which one of the Russian master's? He didn't know either. I persisted in my enquiries: some said the charge was unfair; others, that there were some resemblances to Gorki's *Foma Gordeyev*. The son of a close friend of Gopichand told me that the novelist himself was aware of the allegation and did all he could to snuff it out. Open attack does not hurt an author as much as a whisper campaign. I was moved by *The Bungler* and wanted to be certain whether it was a Gorki copy or not. *Foma Gordeyev* is one of the lesser known novels of Gorki, published

in *Zhizn*, 1899. The main story-line is –

> Bailer Ignat Gordeyev works his way up to become the owner of three steamboats and a dozen barges; he becomes a multi-millionaire, nurses an insatiable thirst for money and indulges in bouts of dissolute orgies. His first wife bears him four daughters but none of them survives. After her death, he marries again and his second wife gives him a son, Foma, and dies in childbirth. The infant Foma is brought up in his equally wealthy godfather Yakov Mayakin's house, along with his godsister Lyuba. As Foma grows into a little boy, his father Ignat takes him to his own house and puts him to school. Ignat tells his son: 'Textbooks are not everything. You need them as a carpenter needs a hammer and saw; they are your tools, but tools can't teach you what use they are to be put to.' Foma is no brilliant pupil and asserts, 'I'll get on in the world without any learning.' Ignat teaches him business and Foma easily catches on. Ignat sends the nineteen year old Foma on a business trip on the Volga, all on his own. On this voyage, Foma has his first woman, Pelagaya; later, he falls in unrequited love with Sophia, the wife of a rich architect; and, after his father's death, lives with a prostitute, Sasha. He grows to hate all merchants, neglects his trade and takes to wine and women. All efforts of Mayakin to din some sense into his wayword godson Foma fail. Towards the end of the novel Foma is reduced to lead a vegetable existence.

Gopichand's detractors compare the pages (140-43) where Sitarama Rao lambasts the leaders on the platform with the ten pages (in a three hundred page novel) of Gorki, where Foma Gordeyev exposes the merchants gathered to celebrate the launching of a new steamboat. Yakov Mayakin makes a speech extolling the merchant class. His godson Foma ridicules the merchants:

> You sons of bitches! ... Robbers! Swindlers! ... Kononov! When are you to be tried for what you did to that little girl? ... Too bad you just built this fine boat. They'll pack you off to Siberia on a State-owned ship ... Gushchin, do you give alms to your nephews? You might at least give them a kopeck a day – you've stolen enough from them to afford it ... Bobrov, here, why did you have your mistress thrown in jail by telling that lie about her stealing your money? If you were sick of her, you could have passed her on to your son – he has taken up with your latest daisy ... As for you, Lupe, why don't you open up a brothel again so that you can fleece your gentlemen clients? ... Who was that fellow you murdered that time, Lupe? ... Zubov! ... Aren't your dreams haunted by Ivan Petrovich Myakinnikov, who hanged himself on your account? And is it true that you steal ten roubles out of the collection plate every Sunday?[7]

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7. *Maxim Gorki: Collected Works in Ten Volumes*, Vol. II, 'Foma Gordeyev' (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978), pp. 288-92.

When Gopichand was writing his novel, Indian Independence was round the corner: for some, a dream come true, for some, a nightmare; and for the creative writer, a foretaste of the new Indian politician: the immoral Parabrahma Sastri, the homosexual Negalingam, the robber Rambhotlu, the rapist Visvesvara Rao, the embezzler Surya Prakasa Rao and the charlatan Chaitanya Swami – Gpoichand puts them all on a single platform.

Gorki's Foma Gordeyev denounces fellow merchants at a private function on a steamboat afloat on the Volga; Gopichand's Sitarama Rao exposes the politicians at a public meeting in front of a temple. Foma is the son of a bailer-become-multi-millionaire; Sitarama Rao, the scion of a family wealthy for generations. Foma is a bachelor; Sitarama Rao, a married man with children. Foma squanders money on wine and women; Sitarama Rao is impoverished in helping others. Foma is a school dropout; Sitarama Rao, a well-educated man, given to philosophical speculations.

Gorki's novel is an expose of the greed, depravity and decadence of the merchant class of the 19th century Russia and anticipates revolutionary forces; Gopichand's novel debunks revolution and predicts political degradation after Indian Independence. Gorki adopts the good old straightforward narrative; Gopichand innovates and probes the depths of his protagonist's psyche. Gorki's novel begins with the father's rise and ends with the son's downfall; Gopichand's novel begins

with the father's death and ends with the son's.

In Gorki's novel, Foma wants freedom from the pursuit of paternal profession, to seek something of his own, though he does not know what it is; when his godfather Mayakin denies him this freedom and threatens to have him certified a lunatic, Foma retaliates out of sheer spite. He does not have the idealist-turned-nihilist Sitarama Rao's courage to stand his ground. When he is overpowered and tied up, Foma whines and moans. He admits defeat and prophesies, 'I am lost – I know it. Not because you're strong, but because I am so weak. You too are worms in the sight of God, and just you wait – you'll get your desserts.'

In Gopichand's novel, Sitarama Rao does not whine or moan; he turns philosophical, screams that everything is an illusion, and goes to the cremation ground; he reflects on life and death; the duo in him engage each other in a fight-to-the-finish and leaves him dead. Sitarama Rao's ending is so unlike Foma Gordeyev's:

For three years nothing at all was heard of Foma. It is said that as soon as he came out of hospital Mayakin sent him to his mother's relatives in the Urals.

But at the end of three years he was seen in town again. Ragged, unkempt, and nearly always drunk, he did indeed give the impression of being mentally unbalanced. Sometimes he would go about with knitted brows and hanging head, looking very forbidding, but at others he

would wear the sad and touching smile of a pious imbecile. There were occasions when he became violent, but they were rare. Lyuba Smolina let him live in a little out-house behind her house.

Townsmen and merchants who remembered him were inclined to make fun of him. On seeing him come down the street, they would cry:

'Hey, you prophet! Come here!'

He rarely came – he avoided people and could not bear to talk to them. But if he did, they would say to him:

'Tell us something about the Judgement Day, will you? Ha-ha! A prophet, indeed!'

A prophet, indeed Gorki's Foma turns out to be, for the Revolution was only a decade away. Gorki was already under the influence of Marxism. In 'Talking About My Craft', Gorki wrote: 'I knew something of the teaching of Marx. "Ownership morality" was as inimical to me as "slave morality" and I developed a third morality: "support the revolt".'[8]

Gopichand, on the other hand, ridicules the Marxist postulates and points to the power of evil over good, whatever the garb.

No two novelists could be more different from each other in their subject and structure as Gorki and Gopichand in these two novels. To say Gopichand stole from Gorki is like saying

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8. Op. cit. p. 304.

Shakespeare plagiarized Annamacharya, when the English bard wrote, 'All the world is a stage…', after the Tirumala saint's song, 'Nanati batuku natakamu…' (Daily life is a drama…). The celebrated Porter scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has echoes of the Sanskrit playwright Bhasa's *Pratima,* but both the dramatists are separated by centuries. That Shakespeare freely borrowed his plots and characters is something even an undergraduate Indian student of English knows! But English Literature is yet to produce a greater playwright.

## IV

The translator has to serve two masters – the author in the original language and the reader in the target language – and serving two masters is never easy. The original author's desire to be read in a language other than his own, and the reader's wish to read a work originally written in another language are the only lifebuoys for the translator.

The title itself posed a problem. *Asamardhuni Jivayatra* literally means 'An Incompetent Man's Life-journey', but it hardly conveys the resonance of the Telugu. *Asamardhudu* is an incompetent person, an inefficient one, a misfit, a mismanager, a bungler, a good-for-nothing. And *Jivayatra* in Telugu has philosophical overtones, with journey as the archetypal metaphor for the individual life. I thought of overcoming the problem by having in English, a title and a subtitle. I considered three possibilities for the title: 'The

Incompetent', 'The Bungler' and 'The Good-for-nothing'.

According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, incompetent (*adj.*) means 'not qualified or able to perform a particular task or function (an incompetent builder); showing a lack of skill (an incompetent performance)' '*n.* an incompetent person'. *Collins Cobuild* says that 'someone who is incompetent does not have the skills that are needed in order to do something, especially a job, successfully; used when they have shown this by doing it badly. (My father was a hopeless incompetent on the domestic side).'

As per the *COD*, bungle *v.tr.* means 'blunder over, mismanage or fail at (as task)' '*intr.* work badly or clumsily' '*n.* bungler'. *CC* says, 'A bungler is a person who often fails to do things properly because they make mistakes or are clumsy.'

Competence implies qualifications, acquired abilities, skills, and it is not such skills or their lack that is suggested about Sitarama Rao. Failing to do things properly or making mistakes or mismanaging applies to Sitarama Rao all right, but clumsiness does not. 'The Good-for-nothing' appears an apt epithet for Sitarama Rao; he himself says more than once that he has become good-for-nothing. But the title may bring to mind the Chinese erotica, *Before Midnight Scholar!*

Thus all the three alternatives have their strengths and weaknesses: the incompetent is literal but bureaucratic; the

bungler is literary but comic; the good-for-nothing is evocative but erotic. I have opted for 'The Bungler', hoping the comic connotation will eventually turn tragicomic. In fact, a perceptive critic has observed that Sitarama Rao's life begins by raising laughter, rouses pity and ends in terror. Humour, pity and fear are the emotions of tragicomedy.

'Life-journey' for *Jivayatra* hardly conveys the philosophical overtones and simply won't do. 'A journey through life' stays close to the Telugu and retains some of the resonance in translation. And this is how I have arrived at the title, *The Bungler: A Journey Through Life*.

In Telugu, *vamsam* has something of clan, lineage, family and house. The difficulty becomes worse when it is *vamsam peru*. *Peru* is name, but think of 'house name', 'family name', 'lineage name' or 'clan name'; sounds absurd in English. In Telugu *peru* also implies fame, glory, reputation. And I had to make a choice to suit the tenor of the talk.

*Kukkina pelayyevallu* literally means 'beame like pressed headlice', but this doesn't make much sense in English, besides killing the image. I had to make a choice from among 'lice under the thumb', 'pressed lice', 'pecked lice' and 'quelled lice' and chose the last for merely reducing the transmission loss.

*Kompalu koolipovu?* means 'Won't the dwellings fall?' But the appropriate English idiom is heavens falling or hell breaking loose. Such choices are the hardest for the translator, amounting

to a choice between fidelity and readability.

I have minimised the footnotes. I have neither italicised nor given meanings of words which have already found place in the *COD*, e.g. darshan, vedanta. But there are words like babu or samadhi, which are in the *COD* but not in the sense Gopichand uses them. In such cases, footnotes became necessary, or where a culture specific custom had to be glossed, e.g. a pregnant wife going over to her mother's place for the delivery.

New Delhi,
August 27, 1996

D. S. Rao

# *The Bungler*

Sitarama Rao's life is rather odd. What comes to mind is a clear brook falling from a high peak to the soil below, mingling with dirt and flowing into a cesspool. We do not know if the brook is aware of its metamorphosis. And if aware, we do not know whether it is anguished by the change. Onlookers pity its downfall. No one can say whether the brook knows it or not. Sometimes it looks as though it is happy to be rid of the ups and downs of the mountains.

On his deathbed his father had told Sitarama Rao, "Babu,[1] maintain the family reputation. I've nothing more to say." Those were his last words.

People around who had heard those last words were amazed. "Didn't talk of property; didn't talk of anything else. He merely said, maintain the family reputation. Look at his greatness!" So they praised.

"That greatness is a family trait," said everyone.

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1. A term of endearment; not "a title of respect, esp. to Hindus" or "derogoratory, formerly, an English-writing Indian clerk," as in COD.

True, it was a great family. Their great-grandfather's grandfather had had a pond dug for the town, and a choultry built as well. His grandfather was dark, like Lord Veerabhadrudu. When he walked the bazaar with a staff in hand, could anyone afford to remain seated? Women fled indoors. A mere mention of his name was enough to silence crying children, who became as quiet as quelled lice. It was he who had the temple built in the town. Even today, only their family had the right to celebrate the wedding ceremony of the deities. To retain this right, his father had gone to the High Court and spent thirty thousand rupees. Every year, he spent money from his own pocket to conduct the temple festivities. Besides, he gave donations to whoever asked. Any marriage party passing through the town had to stop at their house for a day, enjoy their hospitality and only then move on. The Mala[2] and Madiga[3] castes used to vie with one another for work in their employ: the lack of supervision and the chance to steal was the reason, said detractors. True, but none born in that family ever believed a word of it.

Since his childhood, Sitarama Rao had heard many people sing the glories of his family. Some of them would do so in his presence. Moreover, his relatives waxed long and eloquently both on the pomp and show of recent celebrations in the family, and on the heroism of his ancestors. One fact had become

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2. An "untouchable" caste.

3. Cobbler caste.

clear to him: "Money is nothing. All man needs is fame."

Sycophants unanimously agreed with him. "Did money earn us, or did we earn money?" they asked. "There are many who have made money. But, are they remembered as your forefathers are?"

These questions seemed profound to him. After all, it was the same blood that flowed in his veins. And this he proved by spending ten thousand on his father's obsequies.

"A hand more munificent than his father's!" said everyone.

"Boneless hand!" hailed a poet.

For ten days he fed the poor. Relatives who had come for the funeral did not depart for a full month. He sent them away fully satisfied. For ten days he gave free meals to the poor in the nearby villages, distributed clothes with the legend printed on them that they were charity from so-and-so. Those were days when there was hardly any who did not sing his glory. "If we have to praise any one, it is him."

"Maharaja!" they applauded.

After his father's death, he was very liberal to his debtors: those who did not go to him with their tales of woe were sorry. He accepted whatever they could repay. He had only one thing to say, "I won't go to court."

His maternal uncle had owed him forty thousand. Which too was settled. One day this uncle came and took him to his village. Once in his house, the uncle made him feel very

important. His aunt said, "You've come after a long time. And look, how the house is lit up!" His joy knew no bounds at their happiness and the way they looked after him. On the fourth day, talking of his own family affairs, the uncle said, "I can't repay all the money. I have children. Ten acres of wetland, excellent land, I'll give you. Help me. This money is of no account to you. You are an educated man, a competent one. From tomorrow you can earn as much as you care to."

"Even if I don't earn, may I not help you, uncle?" he asked. He did not at all like the idea of his helping others only because he could earn. Like the radiance of the sun, the glow of the diamond, charity was his true nature.

"Why not? Are we strangers?" joined the aunt.

"Aunt, may I not help strangers?"

"That's different," said the aunt. But she did not know what to say next.

"Your father, God bless him in heaven, never once mentioned the debt," said the uncle who was already sorry to have offered ten acres of wetland in settlement of the debt.

"Did I say no to you, uncle?"

"That's it. Have I to say it? He is different," the aunt said with a beaming face. She was delighted at the prospect of settling a debt of forty thousand by a mere ten-acre bit of land. But the husband was annoyed with her.

"Nayana,[4] you know how your father and I used to be! He would never bother about any household matters. I would take care of the land and of the accounts. Did he ever ask of the receipts? Maharaja, he was hailed, and he passed away … You may or may not remember, I used to carry you in my arms and look after you, babu," the uncle said.

"Of course, Uncle," Sitarama Rao said. But he did not remember it. He believed now it was his uncle who had really brought him up. Why would he lie?

"I've always looked upon you as my own brother. One day as I was playing with you on the arugu,[5] you fell down. Believe me, I was frightened to death lest you hurt yourself. How glorious you were then! O, the way you shone like a lord!" the aunt said.

Their good nature astonished him. He wondered why there had ever been an estrangement between such good people and his father in his last days. Some people alleged that while managing the property his uncle had misappropriated a good deal of it. But such a gentleman, would he do it?

If his uncle had embezzled moneys, why would he acknowledge such a huge debt? This must be the talk of jealous people. His father listened to all and sundry. Someone must have carried tales to drive a wedge between his father and his uncle.

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4. A term of endearment used by elders in cajoling the young.

5. A brick platform attached to the front of a South Indian house; a pyol.

As he was occupied with such thoughts his uncle began to worry lest he should go back on his word, and so said, "All right, do as you wish. You know everything. What is there to tell you? … Then shall we complete the formalities today?"

Sitarama Rao accepted the ten acres in settlement of his uncle's debt of forty thousand. His aunt and uncle blessed him. The entire village turned up to see him off.

In the days that followed he delighted in helping others. Everyone treated him with deference. What more could he ask for? Wasn't it enough if one lived one's life like this? The wise say that one should strive to be spoken of well by others.

"Such good nature at such a young age we haven't ever seen," said everyone.

"It runs in the family," they told each other.

In those days he was happy to have fulfilled his father's wish, and proud to have maintained the family reputation.

There was an old man, Ramayya. Everyone called him Grandfather. He had a great regard for Sitarama Rao's family.

"Babu, you are still young and do not know the ways of the world. You should be prudent," Grandfather Ramayya would counsel him.

"I know what I am doing, Grandfather," Sitarama Rao would assert.

"If we have money, people flock to us. Afterwards no one will even as much as look at us, babu."

"Whatever I do, I do not do to win their regard, Grandfather. I do it for the sake of doing."

"Babu, don't do anything that you may afterwards repent. Once you come to repent, scorpions and centipedes inhabit your heart. What are now seen as benevolent acts will go against you. You will make enemies of the very people you help now. Your own virtue will be your undoing."

"I do not desire any reward, Grandfather."

"That alone is not enough, babu," Grandfather Ramayya would say.

He had lofty ideals in his youth. He was eager to live an ideal life, and always strove to do so. In thought, word and deed this was evident.

While others were immersed in day-to-day humdrum trivialities, he was above them, always lost in contemplation.

Family life anguished him. Marrying, begetting, abjectly fretting over children to the point of ruining one's health – the spectacle tore at his heart. Pregnant women waddling about, women in labour, women nursing babies disgusted him.

However much he racked his brain, he could not understand why people married. From the fourth day of the marriage, the husband harassed the wife, and the wife gave it back. "So late in the night you come home? Oh, yes, now you want a home!" she would taunt.

"Rattammodena![6] You know me! It's years since I came to live with my husband. Have I ever crossed the threshold? Have I ever seen the face of another man? I don't know why he is so angry with me," thus the campaign would begin.

"A well or a pit for me to jump into," she would threaten every minute.

She would beat the children to vent the anger over her husband. Still, men did not give up marrying. If marriage was a mistake, even those who should know better, married three or four times, in quick succession, without any hesitation.

He abhorred family life. Not merely during childbirth, the house always reeked of baby-smells. Some women began gathering rags right from the day of the marriage – in anticipation of the arrival of the baby – for the baby's bedclothes, etc. With the onset of pregnancy, they squatted on the ground to sift rice, picking the particles of earth in it and eating them. All these revolted him.

Fathers in search of husbands for their daughters were a hateful sight to him. When a father said, "Our daughter is plump, we don't want a lean boy," he was reminded of cattle fairs.

Considering all this, how could he marry? If he married, what would become of his ideals? So, after a great deal of thinking, he decided not to marry.

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6. Sister-in-law Rattamma; a typical Indian way of socialising by establishing notional relationships.

Whenever friends or relatives brought up the matter, he exclaimed, "Me and marriage!" He did not like to be put on a par with ordinary men.

Laughing slyly they would say, "We too talked like this." They did not believe him. "Speak up. If you are willing, we will find a gem of a girl and arrange the alliance."

Deeply disturbed, he would plead with them in all seriousness, "Don't you want to see me happy?"

"Then, have you made any arrangement of your own or what?" his friends would ask eagerly.

After a minute, he would say, "You don't understand."

So, when such a man decided to marry, little wonder that his friends and relatives were surprised to hear of it! Everyone came and enquired, curious to know the truth.

"We hear you're getting married. Is it true?"

"Oh, yes."

"How come?"

"I want to give a new meaning to marriage."

"What kind of meaning?"

"I won't become a slave to this machine, like all of you. I'll use it to further my ideals."

"Do elaborate a little."

"You'll see," he would say, unwilling to discuss his ideas with them.

The fact was he had fallen in live with Indira, a girl studying in the Gurukul.[7] No way but to marry her. She wouldn't let him touch her until they married. Moreover, her father was a police official. And Sitarama Rao thought the evil in marriage wouldn't taint him if he gave complete freedom to his wife and took care not to have children. "Her life is hers, mine is mine, and in between bouts of pleasure …" he told himself.

But nothing went the way he had hoped. Within a year nappies became scarce. His wife started picking particles of earth in rice. A girl was born to him. What he suffered on that day is known only to God above and the Earth below. As his wife was in labour, he cursed himself and cried, "I am responsible for all her suffering; I am a devil, a sinner!" The killer-machine was taking control of him, he realised, but what was the use? Two kids and three miscarriages in five years.

He became a puppet in life's hands. Things turned out to be totally different. He could not avoid taking up a job. His father-in-law found him a clerk's job in a big firm, and urged the Manager, "My son-in-law … rather peculiar. Please keep an eye on him."

He told Sitarama Rao, "At least from now on be careful. Visit the Manager's house once in a while. It is always good to call on one's boss."

Sitarama Rao was ashamed to have to seek his father-in-law's help to support himself. How small he must seem in his

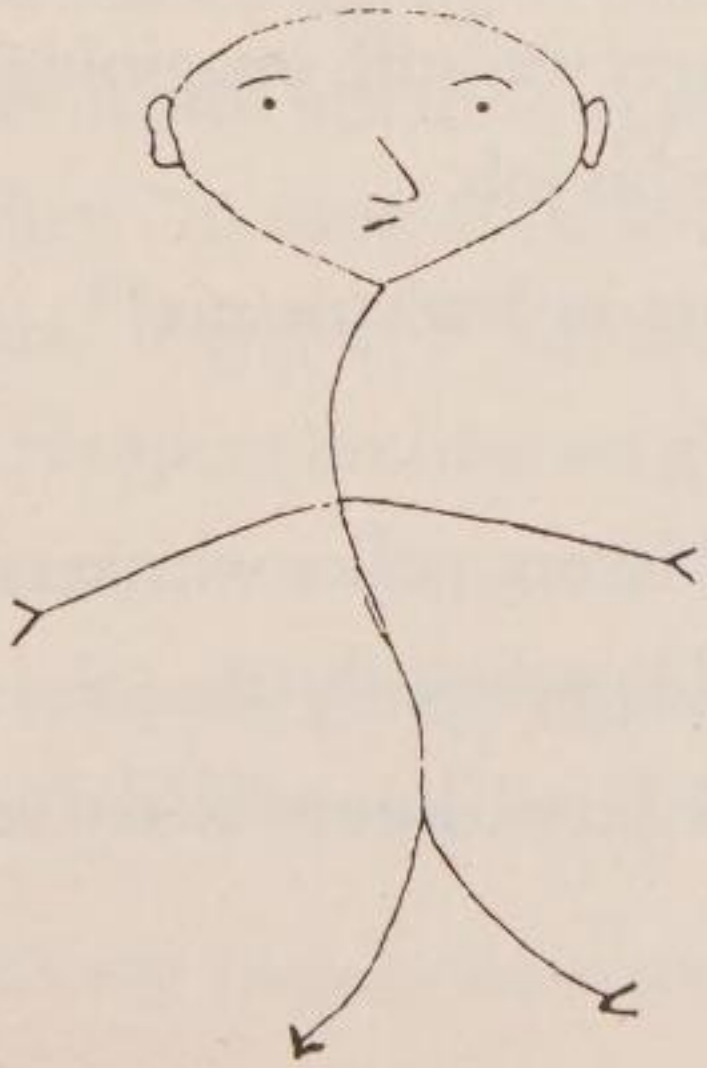
7. A residential school.

father-in-law's eyes! What would his wife think of him?

Friends started teasing and laughing at him. One or two even asked him, "Is this the new meaning you were to give to marriage?" Some others said, "You've kept your word ... You haven't become a slave to marriage. You have become a slave to your father-in-law."

He was angry with his father-in-law, and was obsessed with him. If his father-in-law had not been there, his daughter would not have come into being. And if his daughter had not been there, Sitarama Rao would not be married. If he had not been married, he would not have had all these troubles. For a moment, the world seemed to be full of fathers-in-law. Unseen, they were running this world. He could not carry on with his job.

One day, instead of writing accounts in the accounts book, he drew this figure in the margin –



The Manager discovered it and flew into a rage. "What's this?" he demanded.

"Father-in-law," Sitarama Rao grinned.

"Whose father-in-law?"

"Does your father-in-law also look like this? Hee, hee, hee … Not any particular father-in-law. Everybody's father-in-law. Father-in-law who gives his daughter in marriage. Look, his head is big … eyes small … hands thin … nose is large … hee, hee, hee …" Sitarama Rao said, pointing out the caricature to the Manager.

He lost his job that very day. The Manager had already been annoyed with him: his daughter had had to go to the station to catch a train and he had asked Sitarama Rao to fetch a jutka for her. Sitarama Rao had countered, "Me? Fetch a jutka? And that too, for your daughter?" The Manager had not forgotten this and dismissed Sitarama Rao forthwith. When he came to know that he had been dismissed, Sitarama Rao went to the Manager. The Manager was stiff, imagining that Sitarama Rao had come to beg for his job.

"Where's my father-in-law's picture?"

"Why?"

"I'll put in the whiskers, police whiskers …" Sitarama Rao started clapping and jumping about.

The Manager did not know what to do, and looked nonplussed.

"Did your daughter get a jutka?"

"..."

As the Manager kept staring, Sitarama Rao got more excited. "Send your daughter to your son-in-law. The son-in-law will make your daughter pregnant and send her back to you. After the baby is born you send her back to your son-in-law. He will make her pregnant again and send her to you. And again after the delivery you send her back to him. He will send her to you, you send her to him, he will send her to you ... Isn't this what you do?"[8] He put a finger on his nose, roared with laughter and left.

If anyone asked him how he had lost his job, he replied, "My father-in-law had me dismissed."

He did not try for a job again. He was angry not only with his father-in-law, but with the whole world. People he had earlier helped already stopped coming to him or even greeting him. And they had started railing at him for not organising the temple celebrations, for not making arrangements for free meals in the choultry. "As long as he had, he spent left and right. Now he suffers," they jeered. "Of course, he spent. Spent for whom? For us? He spent for his own glory, for praise from all!"

Sitarama Rao developed a grudge against the world. He did not wish to speak with his former friends. He avoided running

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8. In an upper caste Telugu family, a pregnant woman goes to her mother's house for confinement.

into those whom he had helped. Once in a while, the rancour burst, burst in many ways, mostly on his wife.

The normal rate for a jutka from the station to his house was a quarter-rupee. But he would be charged a half-rupee.

"Masters must give, that we may survive," they would say. And he would not say "No" to them, nor bargain. Going into the house, he would pick up a quarrel with his wife on some pretext or the other.

Occasionally, he had to go to the vegetable market. He would fold the bag and keep it in his pocket, lest someone should see him buying vegetables. He would buy this or that, not bargain, not care to separate the good from the bad, not enquire first at three or four stalls, but buy whatever was near at hand, in a hurry, to avoid being seen, and rush back home through lanes and by lanes. His wife would take a look at the vegetables and say, "Rotten, worm-infested."

He would lose his temper. Was this the reward for his labours?

"Brinjals are a quarter-rupee. And they even bring them to the door," she would say.

"You mean I have filched the money?" He would question her. "It's a trait of your family," he would go on. "Your father is a policeman. He takes chickens for bribes and you take everyone to be like him."

That money had been given to her by her father to buy a sari. He was anguished that he had to spend it like this on himself and took it out on her.

"There is no rice for the evening," his wife would say.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Have it brought."

A fight here too, but how would he pick it? It was true that it was the duty of the husband to get the rice. It was also true that one couldn't do without rice.

"Why say 'have it brought'? Can't you say, 'Get it'? Who will bring it? I. Who else? Don't you know it? Then why this show of 'Have it brought'? I have to die of your sham!"

"Why do you get so angry? What have I said?"

"Angry? You say I am angry? You say words that burn me. And if I say something, you say I am angry. The words *you* utter: are they all right? Have you lost respect for me because I don't earn? What is the use of saying anything to you? I am a fool." By now he would be on the verge of tears.

In those days he wrote a song –

*Demolish*
*the Taj Mahal*
*Dig up*
*the Tughlak Tomb*
*Squash*
*woman's beauty*
*Crush*
*flowering buds*
*Rob*
*the rich*

*Kill*
*the hungry*
*Blood*
*should spurt*
*Skulls and bones*
*should laugh.*

Soon, he was not even moving out of his house. The four walls of his house became the limits of his life. His attitude changed completely. Watching the busybodies around him, he sometimes laughed; sometimes, he was angry. Occasionally, somebody would enquire, "What are you doing?"

He countered, "What is there for me to do?"

And his reply seemed strange to them. They would not pause a while to think. If they did, they would know. They were ignorant. And as this world was made for the ignorant, they prospered, and went through life merrily.

That was all. Come to think of it, what was there to do in this world? Every second, the world changed. But no one understood why this change. There seemed to be no purpose for this change. What could anyone do?

Some went about saying, "Social reform, social revolution." They thrust their chests forward shouting slogans, as if they were doing something very great. Sitarama Rao pitied them. What could they accomplish? There was nothing like perfection. Then why this din? The wise said that in the very solution of one problem lay another problem. This was the

evolution of the world. Therefore, there was always some problem or the other to trouble mankind. Some always suffered. Then, what could they do? Were they deceiving themselves? Or were they duping others? Then all these leaders, intellectuals, pandits, were they ignorant of all this, to toil the way they did? For this, of course, he had an immediate answer.

In their youth, people set out to uplift the afflicted and thus to serve the society with enthusiasm. After a few years when they realised that whatever they had been doing was not fruitful, they had no chance to turn back, nor could they dare proclaim the truth.

By then they had already occupied a respectable niche in society. Pinning faith in their promises, many people had already suffered great hardship and become their followers. What to tell them? Would they keep quiet if they were to be told: "Whatever I preached is all wrong"? Were they to recall what they had undergone with faith in his words, – the hardship, the suffering, the sacrifice – what then? Wouldn't all hell break loose?

Thus, even if the leaders were to discover the truth, they never spoke out. They carried on, as usual; till their death they talked of social reform and social revolution, even if they no longer believed in them. As he was thinking in this vein, one by one, all the social reformers active at that time came to his mind. One young man he knew was an active political worker. A national leader gave his daughter in marriage to that young

man and saw to it that the young man gave up politics and entered a daily newspaper. Another national leader had his daughter highly educated and then gave her in marriage to one who never had a chance of entering politics. Yet another national leader ensured that his son entered the insurance business as a senior official. If these national leaders had any faith in their own words and deeds, why did they do what they did? They said in public, "We've left them to their own free will." In private, they confessed, "You know our lot! Now do as you wish." What else could be their wish?

Fools and simpletons who did not know this secret, fretted and troubled themselves by helping people with this or that. Why should Sitarama Rao who knew better, do the same? Why? Not only that, to him anyone who was enjoying himself was worth a laugh. He could not understand why they were so happy. Innocent young blood, he told himself. The very things Grandfather Ramayya had once told him, he began preaching to others. If they demurred, he countered, "I too thought so before." And again, the very things his friends had told him earlier, he repeated to others.

"There is nothing worth doing in this world," he would say.

"We know it," some of them would retort.

"Then, what do you propose to do?"

"Whatever we are happy to."

"What is happiness? Where is happiness? Can you say that

you are happier than animals? Happiness is in the mind. It lies in contentment. Who can say that a rich man is happier than the coolie who toils day and night in the fields? Who can say a person enjoying the worldly pleasures is happier than a person who has renounced them? Who can say the learned is happier than the ignorant? Come to think of it, it is the ignorant man who is really happy in this world. He is not haunted by thoughts. He is not bothered by unreachable goals. His kind of happiness cannot be everybody's lot."

He hated to see attractive women, prettily dressed. "Why are they so proud? Aren't they like other women? Haven't they to answer calls of nature?"

He would imagine things: the more he imagined the more he hated the things these women did.

One of them got into trouble. Like other ordinary women, this beautiful and attractive woman too shed tears, blowing her nose.

He recollected such scenes and smiled to himself. Perhaps these women were not ashamed to doll themselves up like that! Moreover, each of them was enormously vain about her beauty. What for? He laughed to himself.

He hated even more the young men who ran after these women. The fulfilment of these women's wishes was their sole task. They were proud to follow them. A touch of the sari hem was enough to send them into raptures.

"Why go after them like that?"

"How beautiful she is!" They became ecstatic.

"What kind of beauty is that? What does she have that other women don't?"

"You don't know."

Hadn't he loved once? He had loved more than anyone else. What was it he did not know?

"You think it is great. What's the difference between you and animals? Animals are much better," he would say contemptuously.

"You are heartless!" they would exclaim.

At this he would lose his temper and want to recite the poem Chintamani[9] sang after she became an ascetic –

*You think this is a nose –*
*look at it when it catches a cold.*
*You think these are eyes –*
*no, they are two holes.*
*You think these are breasts –*
*no, they are lumps of flesh.*
*You think this is Love's abode –*
*no, this is a leathery hole.*

He wanted to treat them with this quintessence of Vedanta but refrained, afraid they might hate him for doing so.

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9. A courtesan in a Telugu play, who renounced the earthly pleasures and became a sanyasin.

When he was in college, girls used to get into a big bus and go to the college. He wanted to sit among them in the bus. Once he sat, he wished the bus would topple, that someone's face would be cut, that another's cheeks scratched, yet another's legs broken. Somehow, he delighted in visualising the girls disfigured. But knowing it was wrong to wish so, he would suppress it, never allowing it to surface. Now the same feeling came out in various ways. He was no longer able to control it.

Haunted by various thoughts, he finally came to the conclusion that thinking itself was an error. Constant thinking over every little thing was the root cause of his troubles. He was assailed by such thoughts in his idle hours. So he began to do manual work to keep himself busy. He started doing everything in the house. He turned the backyard into a vegetable garden and watered it daily. This was all right in the beginning, but after a few days he started feeling very tired. As he was not used to manual labour, excessive heat in the body made him very weak. His body ached. He was easily irritated and at home made life miserable for everyone. For no apparent reason, he abused his wife and beat up his daughter. Grandfather Ramayya told him one day, "Babu, this is not right on your part."

"Everyone minding his own business is good. Isn't it, Grandfather?"

"This is not what you should do."

"Why not?"

"You are not used to this. Get some job and lead a comfortable life."

"I can't bear the burden of this life, Grandfather."

"Can't help it, babu. Wherever you go, it will follow you. As long as we are alive we must participate in this life. It is wise to know what we can do and then do it."

"All of us have to die one day or the other, Grandfather?"

"Yes, babu."

"Then, why this yearning?"

"Because we do not know what follows death."

"At least these sorrows would not be there."

"Nor these joys. Nothing. Some think this life is better than that nothingness. They tell us something more. It is true many are suffering now. But isn't it possible for a man to achieve a life without suffering? Many have that hope. Each one tries in his own way. However, babu, what is it we do by dying? The problems of the world can't be solved by the death of one man. Men continue to be born. Whatever the uncertainty in this world, one thing is certain, and that is man's existence. So, everyone must go on doing his job. The one who doesn't will be a burden to himself."

This was not clear to Sitarama Rao. He could no longer form a definite opinion on anything, however small. His mind wandered, vexed by thoughts.

At one moment, a particular view appealed to him; another

moment, the opposite would seem the right choice. He would think of doing something, and, quite unwittingly, begin doing the exact opposite of it. Midway, he would remember that he had decided differently. Then he would say to himself, "Maybe this is right! Or else why would I have the urge to do it?" But soon, it would occur to him, "How could both be right? Either that or this should be right." He would stop halfway and sink in thought.

"Since there is nothing ideal in this world, there is no purpose for anything. All things are good; all things are bad. The wise say that everything has many facets to it. There is nothing good or evil; the way you see it makes it so."

"Isn't it better not to see at all than see, imagine something that is not there, and be perturbed by it?"

Suddenly, it would occur to him, "Maybe the trouble starts with the very idea of doing something."

He would sit still.

"Do not let the mind wander, rein it in," the wise say. And when it was his own mind that was wandering, how could he himself hold it in rein?

Ideas change according to circumstances. Some advise changing the circumstances. He had no power to alter his circumstances due to the circumstances themselves. Then who would change his circumstances?

Philosophers tell you to see the seeing. When it was he who

was seeing, how could he see the seeing?

Life became a puzzle for him, his head an anthill bustling with thoughts; not only his head, his life itself, a den for rumination. Covering himself up, lying down, closing his eyes, forgetting the outside world, he fell into reflection. Question upon question rose, but no answer was found for any.

Now his life consisted of lying down, eyes shut, his body fully covered by a blanket.

# *The Bungler's Wife*

Clearing the hearth of the cold ashes, Sitarama Rao's wife told her daughter, "Baby,[1] draw the muggu[2] in front of the house."

It was not yet clear daylight. But it wouldn't do to wait for daylight, people would be out in the street, and so it was her habit to sweep the front of house, sprinkle water and draw the muggu. Recently, she had gone out in a soiled sari and Sitarama Rao lost his temper and shouted, "You are doing this to disgrace me."

After that, she was afraid even to peep outside.

Baby went out with the muggu tin. And she collected the ashes on a broom and threw them on the garbage dump.

The garbage dump was growing like sin itself.

Meanwhile the milkmaid came. Handing over the milk pot, she asked, "Will you have me paid today?"

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1. 'Papa' in Telugu is a girl child, also used as a term of endearment.
2. Quicklime powder or rice flour; patterns made with it on the ground for decoration.

"How much is it, Venkamma?"

"How much?...Today, it is already two months. Last month, it was nineteen rupees six annas, this month seventeen rupees three annas. Nineteen plus seventeen is thirty-six rupees, and this month's three annas added to last month's six annas is nine annas; total thirty-six rupees nine annas." The milkmaid couldn't have accounted so easily had she not worked it out thoroughly earlier with her daughter.

"Thirty-six rupees!" She told herself.

"I am not the sort to pester every now and then. I have been delivering milk to this house since the elder master's time. You know me. I need the money now, so I am asking. My daughter is about to begin her family life. While the old woman is still alive, it won't be proper for her to go without a sari and a blouse piece. She might feel hurt."

No regular supplier to that house ever pestered for payments. It could be due to old custom, or because any false billing would never be questioned.

"You have waited so long, Venkamma, wait for one more day. He hasn't yet woken up. As soon as he gets up, I'll ask for the money and pay you tomorrow."

"All right," said Venkamma and went away.

She was sorry she could not pay Venkamma when she asked. Venkamma must have needed the money badly! A daughter going to her new home! But what could she do? There was not even a counterfeit cowrie in the house. Her eyes turned

moist.

There were no water-taps in the town, nor were there any wells in the neighbourhood. A water-tap and a well...they had both in their house. Therefore, starting early morning people came, with pots on their shoulders, lined up like ants. Women with pots on their shoulders, with timid looks in their eyes, minced their way to the house. As a young woman came for water, casting furtive glances, the old woman in her house followed with a pot on her shoulder, keeping an eye on the young woman. Men came with sure, heavy steps, balancing pots with both hands. The young woman stepped aside and smiled. The old woman said from behind, "Isn't he Ramayya's Lakshmayya? Why did you step aside? He is like an elder brother to you." And so she would invent innocuous relationships. By then, the water in the pot would spill on to the young woman's shoulder and wet her blouse.

Seenayya came for water.

Sitaram Rao's wife said, "Seenayya, fetch water for the house today."

"Yes, I will," said Seenayya, stepping near the well.

Seenayya came from the Palanad area. If anyone were to ask him, "Why did you come to this town, Seenayya?" he snapped back, "For a living". He hired a push-cart and earned a living. It was his aim to earn a hundred and sixteen rupees, then go back to his village and marry. In his spare time he helped with petty jobs and accepted in return some vegetable curry or other.

He didn't have anyone to cook for him. All he could do was to boil some rice for himself.

She cleaned the kitchen and lit the hearth. Seenayya was filling the metal cauldron in the backyard. Baby came with the muggu tin.

"Have you done it?"

"Yes."

"Do it in the backyard also. You are a darling."

"I said I have done it."

"In the backyard?"

"Yes, at the gate, outside, in the bylane, in the backyard – I've done it everywhere."

The mother was happy the daughter was doing things without being told. She said, "Go now, go and study for a while. Meanwhile, I'll make some coffee. Then you may have coffee and go to school."

"Then, come." It was her habit to study with her mother for an hour before going to school.

"Today I can't … Study by yourself. We already studied those lessons last night."

Instead of going to her books, she sat down near her mother and asked, "What if I miss school for a day?"

"How will you study if you don't go to school? And what will you do, staying at home?"

"I'll wash dishes."

"You will!"

"I know it. I'll scrub them bright and sparkling! Don't I see you doing it daily? What's there? A little dung, some ashes, and the vessels sparkle."

The mother was reminded of something. Sadly, she drew her daughter near and said, "Why should you do it, when I am there?"

"Last night you said you weren't feeling well."

Tears welled up in her eyes. True, she was not well. But could she already draw her daughter into these menial jobs. Wasn't it enough she herself was doing them?

As the mother sat in silence, the daughter felt bold and said, "I won't go to school. The teacher daily asks for fees, fees … And if I tell father, he gets angry."

That day she did not go to school, and her mother did not press her.

The daughter was washing dishes. The mother was bargaining with the vegetable seller.

"The other day you gave us cucumbers. They turned out to be bitter, like poison. Not even one was good for use. Useless to buy from you."

"Have I grown them in my backyard? I merely sell. What do I know? They give, I bring. If princely people like you buy, I make a little money and my belly fills."

"Have you brought good vegetables at least today?"

"Very good ones. Else who will even see my face!"

She knew the old hag never brought good vegetables. She carried around cheap ones and sold where she could. Where was the alternative to buying from her? There was no money in the house for sending someone to the market. Ask the old woman to come the next day and she would.

"What is price of the ladyfingers?"

"Take them. At whatever price that suits you." She took out the balance and started weighing the vegetable.

"Come on, tell me the price."

"I've just sold some to that banya lady. Ask her."

"What price?"

"What price! Will I lie to you? Four annas a quarter-viss.[3]

"Four annas! … Old hag, you have no children. What do you do with all the money?" she asked with a laugh.

"All right, take them, three annas for you."

She gave ladyfingers, snakegourds and green chillies. The old woman coaxed her to take a half-viss bittergourd too. She agreed, afraid the old woman might otherwise insist on immediate payment. She knew that the old hag could not sell the bittergourd anywhere and so was dumping it on her. But what to do? The old woman weighed half-viss bittergourd and asked for money.

3. Viss is a weight of 120 tolas.

"I've no change. Come, see me tomorrow. I'll pay you."

"All right," the old woman said, pleased with the deal.

Meanwhile Seenayya came in after filling the vessels with water.

"Seenayya, you have to go to the bazaar."

"Yes, I'll."

"You have to fetch firewood."

"Give me the money, I'll."

But where was any money? She went inside, as if to get some. She went near the backyard wall and called out to neighbour Kantamma.

"Kantammakka,[4] will you lend me five rupees? The other day I got blouses stitched and have to pay the tailor. I don't feel like asking my husband. I am afraid he might say, 'Only the other day I bought saris worth a hundred rupees. And now more expense and so soon!' My father will come here in a few days. As soon as he comes, I'll return your money." So she said, taking the entire blame on herself – it would be shameful to say there were not even five rupees in the house, it would be an affront to her husband's self-respect.

"Ayyo,[5] is that all! Anyone could be in difficulty," so saying Kantamma took out five rupees and gave her. She gave those five rupees to Seenayya and told him, "Bring two measures of firewood."

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4. Sister Kantamma.

5. A term of commiseration.

"All right."

Seenayya took two steps toward the bazaar when she stopped him, "Look, Seenayya, since you are going to the bazaar anyway, bring a quarter-viss of butter too."

She knew that the firewood shop and the butter shop were nowhere near each other. Afraid he might mind had she given him both the errands at the same time, she added the second as an afterthought.

The money in hand and a jute string to tie the firewood, Seenayya set off.

Suddenly, she remembered that groceries in the kitchen had run out. She looked for Baby. She saw her scrubbing utensils and she was sad and glad at the same time, sad that she had to wash dishes, glad at the way she was doing it. Hands full of dung and face full of ashes, Baby squatted on the stone-slab, and with legs spread out, was scrubbing the vessels, head in rhythm with the movement of hands.

"Baby, come here for a moment," mother called her.

"Let me finish the job in hand," Baby replied. She did not stop her work, nor did she look up.

"You have to get some groceries from Subbayya's shop," the mother said.

Subbayya's was a retail provision store, very near their house. They had a running account there. Sometimes, Baby fetched groceries from there.

"Write what you want. I'll get them."

The mother wrote on a paper the list of things she wanted.

| | |
|---|---|
| Big onions | one viss |
| Dry red chillies | quarter-viss |
| Coriander seeds | two giddas[6] |
| Black pepper | one anna worth |
| Mustard seeds | half-anna |
| Sunlight soap | three-and-half annas |
| Cooking oil | half-viss |
| Soapnuts | one seer |
| Lux soap | four-and-half annas |
| Tamarind | half-viss |
| Red gram | two seers |
| Bengal gram | two-and-half annas |

Baby rinsed her hands, wiped them on her skirt, and holding the paper between two fingers so as not to wet it, read the list.

"Mother, why two soaps?"

"One is for washing clothes."

"For washing your sari?"

"Yes."

"You need a special soap for washing your sari!" She said and ran out.

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6. Gidda is a weight: one-sixteenth of a seer.

Seenayya brought the firewood and put it in the kitchen. Baby ran to the grocer's four or five times and fetched the provisions in a small bag. Seenayya had also brought the butter. She arranged the groceries and heaved a deep sigh. "We are ashore today! Another day of housekeeping!" She said to herself.

But the worries did not cease. Like a nose that came off each time it sneezed how long would this housekeeping last? However hard she strove, she could not sight the shore. The harder she tried, the more violent the waves grew. And on these waves the boat might wreck any moment.

Lifting the milk pan from the fire and putting it down, she looked at her hands. Daily pot-scrubbing had worn away the nails; the forearms had turned dark with soot, the palms no longer soft as before. She felt both her figure and her attitude had been changing. She was too frightened to think any more.

"See if your father is awake."

"No, not yet."

"Wake him up. The coffee may run cold."

"I wont wake him. He will scold."

Making the coffee, she brooded …

Thoughts of her girlhood, her college days came to her mind. She had spent her best days at the Gurukul. She was taught how to look after husbands, how to take care of children. What sweet thoughts she had thought! When she married, everyone really thought she was lucky. She had thought so too. But when it came to the experience, everything became

topsy-turvy. Where lay the fault, she did not know, where was the error?

"Mother! … The coffee! …"

Lost in thought, she had forgotten the coffee and was spilling it.

Pulling herself together, she said, "Baby, please wake up your father."

"I won't."

"You're a darling!"

"He will scold."

"What if he scolds? Wont a father get angry? Please go. If the coffee is cold, he won't take it."

Two tear drops fell from her eyes. The other day when he had woken up late and found the coffee cold, he scolded her, "Is it that difficult for you to wake me up?" Yesterday, when the daughter woke him, he lost his temper.

"What wrong have I done?" she sat lost in thought.

Seeing her mother pensive, Baby tried to draw her into talk.

"All right, I'll go. Tell me, father is the eldest. Does he know everything?" she asked.

"He knows everything …"

"But when I asked him to multiply thirteen by nine, he said he did not know."

"He must have said that because he had something else on his mind. Wouldn't he know that much?"

"Really, mother, he didn't know. The other day when I asked him what was in the stars, he said he did not know and was wild with me," said the daughter. "Really, mother, you ask him. Ask him how the wind comes. Ask him how high the sky is. Ask him the uses of the coconut palm. Ask him how oil is made ..."

As the daughter was enumerating what her father did not know, the mother laughed.

She recalled her own girlhood. However high a girl's intelligence, what use? Where was the opportunity for it to blossom? If the husband did not allow it to bloom, wouldn't it be like scented water[7] thrown on ashes?

What would her daughter's future be like? She sat thinking.

The daughter rose and went to wake her father.

Sitarama Rao would not take coffee except in a glass tumbler. In any other tumbler, it wasn't like taking coffee, he would say. Therefore she had got a glass tumbler especially for him, and as soon as he drank his coffee, she washed it and kept it in the almirah, for fear children might break it. Now she rose to get the glass tumbler. His wife.

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7. Panneeru in Telugu.

# *The Bungler's Idealism*

Sitarama Rao did not wake up from sleep, yet. For some days, he had been having dreams. All of them at dawn. It is said dawn-dreams come true.

He was doing penance in a dark forest so dense that ants couldn't crawl through, nor crows enter. On the one side, lions and tigers were roaring, on the other, herds of elephants were trumpeting with raised trunks. Rabbits were hopping; deer were gambolling. Peacocks were dancing, spreading their fan-tails. Snakes were hissing. A cobra raised its hood over his head, shading him from the sun. From behind a tree, a python was speaking in human voice, "Go that way, come this way." Chattering monkeys were jumping on the trees. Amidst all this, birds were flying in circles.

A bear climbed a palmyra, drank the toddy on the top, and, its head between its legs, fell with a thud. The bear was not hurt, but the earth shook. The penance was broken. He opened his eyes and looked around. He must have been angry at the interruption, for from his eyes, a radiance, a light, a fire rose

and went straight to the bear and singed its hair. Now the bear looked white like a cloudless sky, a peeled banana.

He closed his eyes and resumed his penance. Aeons passed.

Anthills grew quickly around him. His nails grew and became twisted like a clown's walking stick. His beard became thick, like a dense cloud. The wasting of his body and the appearance of a grand lustre on his face – both happened at the same time. Stranger still was that the more his body wasted, the greater became the lustre on his face.

Suddenly, lightning struck. It was not an ordinary lightning. Like a waterfall splitting the mountains open to leap onto the earth, like the flow of love tearing hearts to pour out, the lightning struck in front of him, and remained there. Forged with its light was a bridge of brilliance between the sky and the earth.

At the brilliance of this lightning, lions, tigers, elephants – all the wild animals were dazed. They became immobile, standing as they were standing, sitting as they were sitting, roaming even as they were roaming.

The sound of a thousand gigantic drums was heard.

He opened his eyes and saw. Parvati-Parmeshwar came running over the bridge of brilliance and appeared before him. Parvati-Parmeswar were not two persons.

Ardhanariswara[1] ... In one body, half Goddess Parvati and half Lord Siva. As if to make this absolutely clear, a black cloth

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1. Half-woman, half-man; one of the forms of Siva, the third of the Hindu Trinity.

partitioning the two halves covered Parvati while Siva spoke, and Siva while Parvati talked. Thus, except by mistake or when the partition flapped in the wind, both of them would not be seen at the same time.

Before speaking to Sitarama Rao, Siva-Parvati conferred with each other, in private.

"You don't listen to me!" reproached Parvati.

"What have I not listened to?" asked Siva.

"Devotees just have to call, and you appear before them with a dozen boons in your pocket."

"What am I to do? I was born for that!"

"So what? Isn't there a time and a p1ace for everything?"

"What can I do if devotees do penance without bothering about a proper time and place?"

"As you please."

"What boon shall we grant him? You will say I haven't consulted you!"

"Will he take what we give?"

"What do you think he will do?"

"He will want you to give him what he wants."

"What shall we do?"

"Ask him what he wants."

Siva asked, "Child! Your penance has borne fruit. As you have already opened your eyes, ask what you want."

Sitarama Rao fixed his thoughtful gaze on Siva. He had to

ask for a boon, what boon?

Vaiswanaradu[2] said, "Bhaan!"

"Food," said Sitarama Rao.

The partitioning black cloth covered Siva's face. Exposed, Parvati was taken aback, "Oh dear! Please don't grant him this boon," she prayed, in all humility and fear.

"Why?" asked Siva.

"If you grant him this boon, he will want me to cook for him," said Parvati.

Fearing that Parvati might prevent the grant of the boon to him, Sitarama Rao said, "You needn't cook for me. I don't want anybody to cook for me. Without my asking, my belly should always be full with all kinds of delicious food."

The black cloth covered Parvati. Siva said, "Child! I am pleased with your devotion. I'll see you will never feel hungry."

"What is the use of your making me free from hunger! Is this how you care for the distressed? How you guard your votaries? You have won fame as benefactor of the poor! Saviour of seekers of protection! Why all these names, O Lord! Have you taken them to deceive your devotees?"

Siva was taken aback. "Child! Don't be hasty. Explain what you want."

"I must have hunger as well as enough food to appease it."

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2. An epithet of Agni, the God of Fire; here it implies; the digestive fire in Sitarama Rao's belly.

"So be it," said Siva.

The black cloth covered Siva.

Parvati said, "Let's go now." She knew her husband and was afraid he might say something he shouldn't.

"Another thing, my Lord!" said Sitarama Rao.

"Don't concede anything now," said Parvati.

"Why?" asked Siva.

"He may want another boon," Parvati said.

"Let's grant it."

"We'll lose our respect."

"My love! Do you know why I am more popular among devotees than Brahma and Vishnu.[3] Do you know why most devotees pray for my darshan? Because I appear readily and grant boons for the asking. I'll do nothing to spoil the good name I've earned from the very beginning."

"As you wish. You love your devotees more than you love me."

"No. I love my own name and fame more than all of you."

Turning to Sitarama Rao, Siva asked, "Child! What's it?"

"You should not grant my boon to anyone else."

"I won't," Siva promised. Sensing that her husband was already becoming indiscreet, Parvati hustled him, "Let's go."

"Let's," tarried Siva.

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3. The first and the second of the Hindu Trinity, the third being Siva.

"He will ask for another boon."

"Let him," said Siva.

"Ultimately he will put his hand on your own head. O Lord please remember Bhasmasura,[4]" Parvati said.

At the mention of Bhasmasura, Siva was frightened. Recalling all the travails he had to undergo to escape from Bhasmasura, he turned to Sitarama Rao, blessed him, "Child! May you fare well!" and then off they went.

Hunger, hunger, hunger. As soon as Parvati – Parmeshwar vanished, Sitarama Rao felt so hungry that he wanted to swallow the whole universe without even chewing it. From within Vaiswanarudu cried again, "Bhaan!"

At that cry, the earth shook, mountains turned to powder, monkeys fell from trees like ripe fruit, birds pierced the sky like rockets, snakes sloughed their skins, peacock tails snapped, the whitened bear turned red.

"Bhaan!"

At the sound, the anthills and snake pits that had formed around Sitarama Rao scattered. The beard came off and danced in the wind. Nails broke loose, turned into swords drawn and cut up the entire jungle into shreds.

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4. The demon who was granted a boon by Siva that anyone on whose head the demon kept his hand would be reduced to ashes; at once the demon Bhasmasura wanted to try the efficacy of the boon by keeping his hand on the head of Lord Siva Himself. Lord Siva ran for his life and was rescued by Vishnu, who assumed the form of the divine dancer, Mohini and tricked Bhasmasura into placing his hand on his own head, thereby destroying himself.

"Bhaan!"

The heaven cracked. From the openings, Urvasi, Rambha, Tilottama and other celestial beauties emerged like the rays of sun, their hands laden with trays of delicious dishes. One of them sat on the lap of Sitarama Rao and started feeding him. The others were singing and dancing, a feast for the eye.

In a trice, the dense jungle was transformed. Wherever he saw, there were koels singing, there was music in running brooks. Rabbits were drinking the milk of tigresses, lionesses suckling deer, snakes hanging in place of elephants' trunks, monkeys riding bears. All was festive, green and great for Sitarama Rao's eyes to rejoice.

Unfortunately, Sitarama Rao moved in his bed. His sleep was disturbed; the vision vanished. The coconut sapling near his cot rustled in the wind and made a crackling sound. Someone was calling across the barren wall. They were quarrelling in the neighbour's house. The black dog sleeping in his bed got up and went out.

He had a hazy notion that his wife was already up and about, doing her chores. As his gaze turned from the dream-world sweetness to the daily life, he felt an insufferable pain. He was angry with his wife. Always work, work, work and work … She got up at four in the morning and kept on doing something or the other till she went to sleep at night. But she didn't to anything well or neatly.

Suddenly, it occurred to him that she was in her ninth

month. He grew angrier. The ninth month! Didn't she have sense? She drew water from the well herself! Elephant-like cots she raised and laid them out herself! When she lifted those weights, what if her foot slipped? Did she care? She would lie in bed and groan.

It would be for him to run to the doctor for medicine, for this and for that. She was born to make his life hell.

In spite of her advanced pregnancy, she had gone to a perantam[5] the other day. What would people think? Oughtn't she to know better? Really, these women had no shame. They would parade themselves as if they wanted everyone to know that they were going to have babies.

"Father! Father!" Baby was waking him. "Get up, father. The sun is up."

He wanted to get up, but was too lazy to do so. He was filled with another fear. The moment he got up, his wife would say, "No rice in the house, no lentils, no vegetables …" His body was aching. It could be due to his sleeping in the open. No, not that. Last night when the little girl had plagued him for the navar[6]-bed, he had given it to her, while he, himself had slept on the string-cot. Ooh, these children were the death! They soaked all the cots. His wife would say, "After all children …"

"Get up, father, mother asks you to."

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5. A gathering of women, mostly married, invited to each other's houses for domestic celebrations.

6. Broad cotton tape bed.

"Ah! Mother asks me to get up. What else will she do? Giving orders too! Came like a fluff of cotton and became a nail. That's how it is! She won't ask, she will make the daughter ask. This is a new trick of hers these days."

"Please get up. The coffee is getting cold," said the wife.

Wondering how he had ever loved this woman, he got up, rubbing his eyes, "So your mother can't bear to see me alive?" he asked his daughter, standing beside her mother.

"Coffee," his wife, said handing him the tumbler.

"Let me get up first," Sitarama Rao said.

He got up.

"Coffee."

"Will you let me brush my teeth?"

"You may have it again then."

"Don't I have to brush my teeth?"

"You are used to bed-coffee …"

"So what? Is it a bad habit? Has God prescribed that one should take coffee only after brushing teeth? Brushing teeth after drinking coffee, or drinking coffee after brushing teeth – it is my will …"

"I am not saying no. Since you are used to bed-coffee …"

"Bed-coffee? Or ass-egg's[7] coffee?" He snatched the glass

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7. Literal translation of the absurd expletive, *gadedaguddu*, which, in Telugu, rhymes with bed, *beddu*; the rhyme is lost but the absurdity remains; altogether, it is absolute nonsense.

tumbler from his wife's hands. And then he remembered that he had taken it after first rejecting it. He wanted to smash the glass tumbler against the wall. Instead, he gulped the coffee down.

There were stalwarts in every field in the world. And it was an endless wonder for him that they could not ensure food for all. Moreover, like rabid dogs they fought bitterly among themselves: "Food for my community!" "Food for my people!" "Food for my country!" "Food for my nation!" The forums where they wrangled they gave big names. International conferences, they called them. One important leader from each country attended it, and gave lecture after lecture, rolled out words for hours and hours without pausing for breath. What was it he sought, with all this lecturing, all the words he rolled out?

Food!

"No food for our stomachs! We are dying of hunger! Pray give us food, give, give," they begged other countries.

What a shame!

And even as this leader was disgracing himself, an important leader from another country would get up and roar – "Let them die. But no food should be sent to that country."

Some countries with surplus food were prepared to dump it into the seas, but would not agree to give it to another country. Why another country? They would not distribute it

even among their own poor!

As they wrangled …

People of all countries waited for the outcome, like jackals at the grave pit. They waited for news of which country got what morsel. Their conduct seemed shameful and disgusting to Sitarama Rao.

There were so many intellectuals in this world. Couldn't at least one of them invent an easy way of finding food? Why couldn't they see to it that one could live by smelling, inhaling or drinking something? Then war, destruction, suffering and anxiety would vanish! All would be happy. But they wouldn't think like that. They said society had certain laws and they had to be followed; any natural change in society should be welcomed. One phase followed another, it would appear. One should wage a revolution against another. This would lead to a classless society. And then there would be food for all!

He did not like this argument at all.

What was it?

Those who had plenty would never agree to ensure food for all! They would resist and retaliate. So, the have-nots should unite, rise against them, take over the government, and implement the programme of food for all!

"I don't agree with this theory," said Sitarama Rao.

"Why not?"

"It is wrong to say that those who have plenty will oppose

the call for food for all. How many haves in the society are not helping the have-nots? They continue to help, even at the cost of their properties; even facing utter ruin!"

"They do it for their own glory."

"Let it be for any reason. But you agree that apart from economic considerations, there's something which makes men do good!"

"As soon as they quench their thirst for glory, they cheat the have-nots."

"Won't the have-nots, once they have food, cheat the haves?"

"They won't."

"Why not?"

"..."

"It is idle to insist that hunger entitles one to come to power, to make people happy. Lack of food leads to many evils. To say that only those who have suffered these calamities can rise in revolt and make people happy, is to assert that healthy babies are born only after abortions, not after successful labour. In fact, there is another matter. If lack of food creates revolutionary energy and then benevolence to make people happy; and, once food is made available, what if, out of a desire for fame, people are duped; then why demand food for all? It is perhaps better food is not there for all!"

In this way he would argue and go on arguing, and finally tell himself, "Meanwhile we die, and then who cares what happens?"

All of a sudden, his mind would turn to philosophy.

"Our seers, unlike westerners, looked at this problem in its proper perspective," he thought. Instead of appeasing hunger like westerners, they tried to overcome it. Ancient texts have it that they had lived by smoking. Something like that would be fine, he mused.

But, it occurred to him, that death might come this moment, any moment! Then why this anxiety? All right then, do what the seers asked. Renounce, go to dense jungles, do terrible penance. But then all this business took several years! It might mean facing many ordeals. And then after all this, if one were to die without reaping the fruit? There was no certainty that one would live for a definite number of years – to do anything! If one were to die without any joy, this life would be wasted!

He did not believe in rebirth.

Then another thought would occur to him; we could do nothing unless we were guranteed life for a hundred years … If you told an intelligent man – 'You may die any time; why, you may, even as you are talking to me, kick the bucket; but you should go ahead and work in the belief that you are going to survive for several hundred years' – would any intelligent man feel like doing anything?

Whichever way he thought, however deep he probed, he came to the conclusion, "There is nothing to do in this world except subsist till death."

One day he asked Seeyayya, "What Seenayya! Have't seen you for the last four days!"

"I had been to Narasaraopet."

"What for?"

"I had to carry some loads on the cart."

Sitarama Rao was sad to see Seenayya toiling hard to get married. It would never occur to Seenayya to think of not marrying, not having children, not doing any work! Lucky man!

"Seenayya, what will you do after marrying?"

Seenayya did not understand this question. His grandfather, his great-grandfather's father, all of them had married. He too would marry. His forefathers had had children. God willing he too would have. His forefathers had earned a living. He too would. There was no place for the question "Why?" No question of "What will you do?"

Not knowing what to say, Seenayya simply gaped at him.

"Seenayya, will you come back here after marriage?"

"No," he was emphatic.

"Why not?"

"What have I here?" All my relatives are there. Doing some coolie work or the other I'll make a living."

"Then, why have you come here?"

"I can make a living there, but I can't save money. To save some money I came here ..."

He would go there, raise a family. The children would grow. Live by their labour somehow. Toiling till the end, he would drop down dead somewhere. The question "Why?" wouldn't occur to him in these routine happenings. In this manner, he would carry on.

Ignorant Seenayya was happy; wise Grandfather Ramayya was happy. But he, Sitarama Rao, was unhappy. It was vulgar to worry over food; to pretend ignorance knowingly was self-deception – and both these did not behove him.

He would not make an effort – food should come of its own accord. He would not try – pleasures should come of themselves to smother him. Misfortunes should not come near him. Whatever he wished should happen. He would not make an effort. Was success after struggle something remarkable? Even an old hag could achieve it. In what way was he unique? Without any effort whatsoever, the journey of life should go on. If not, he had better die. Wasn't it better to die than to live and suffer, squabbling with all and sundry over petty things? That at least was in his hands!

Among the things Sitarama Rao could do, this was the most significant.

"Father!" called Baby, running in.

"Yes," replied Sitarama Rao.

"Some people have come for you."

"Let them."

"They are sitting in the room."

"Let them."

"They come daily ..."

"Who?"

"Your friends."

At the mention of friends, Sitarama Rao quickly went into the room. He and his friends began a discussion.

"How did life come into being?" Sitarama Rao asked.

"Primal elements are two – the Animate and the Inanimate," someone said.

"The Animate is important, it runs the world," said another.

"The Animate is eternal. The Inanimate is born and dies," said yet another.

"Wrong, both are primal elements," said the first one. "Since the Inanimate changes its form, it seems transient. But that is also eternal. When we die, our bodies decay, that is, they mix with dust, and become dust. And out of that another form is born."

"What is the difference between a living body and a corpse?" asked Sitarama Rao.

"One has the Animate Power, the other hasn't."

"What has happened?"

"It has left the body."

"Where has it gone?"

"The Individual Soul joins the Eternal Soul."

"Does it mean that the Animate can be independent of the Inanimate?"

"Why not?"

"No," said someone.

"Why should we assume that the Animate is independent?" asked Sitarama Rao.

"Or else we can't explain how moving things become motionless, how man lives and dies …"

"When a car moves, which Animate Power has entered it? And when it stops, which Animate Power has left it?" asked Sitarama Rao.

"You are right. What our people mouth are all outdated theories. They do not stand the scrutiny of logic. Matter changes every moment. In that evolution, life manifested at a particular stage. That's all. There's nothing that has come from outside, or has gone out …" said someone.

"How did it come?"

"Like the car – by the union of certain forces."

"Is there a reason for this union?" asked Sitarama Rao.

"No," cried all with one voice.

Neither Sitarama Rao, nor his friends, believed in God.

"Is life born to achieve something?"

"No."

"Why is it born?"

"For no purpose."

"What is clear to us is the outcome of the evolution of a thing, which itself is born without a purpose. When that itself has no purpose, how can our life have any purpose or ideal? We are born for no reason," Sitarama Rao declared.

"No. Man can think, can look ahead. Therefore he sets himself an ideal and makes his life purposeful," said someone.

"Why?"

"For all to be happy."

"From what we have discussed just now, it is clear happiness and misery are man made. We have learnt to be elated by some feelings and depressed by others. So, why all this fuss over something which we ourselves have created?" Sitarama Rao queried.

"So what do you want us to do?"

"Why should we have to say do something, or ourselves do anything?"

"Why should we *not* have to do anything?"

"No, not so either," said Sitarama Rao.

"Then why say we don't have to do anything?"

"Because man is under the mistaken notion that he *has* to do something."

"You spread despair," said someone.

"Yes. That is the difference between man and the animal. An animal has no hope, no despair. Man has both," Sitarama Rao said.

"So what is the conclusion?"

"What is there to conclude? We are born for no reason; if we can live without one, we will; else we die!" so concluded Sitarama Rao.

# *The Bungler's Maternal Uncle*

As Sitarama Rao was going out of the house, he found an envelope on the table. He knew it was a letter from his maternal uncle. Some time back when he had written to his uncle asking for a hundred rupees, his uncle had not replied. Outraged by the lack of response, he had written another letter –

"You find it difficult to give me a hundred rupees now. You seem to have forgotten I once helped you out. I settled your debt of forty thousand for a mere ten-acre land. Do you remember it? Later, when I was in need, you yourself bought back those ten acres for ten thousand. It is not in ignorance that I overlooked what you had done. When I wrote to you requesting you to sell the land, you made many excuses; no one was willing to buy, the prices and fallen and so on, and then you yourself bought it back at a thousand an acre, the land which was easily worth fifteen hundred an acre. I knew everything, but inclined to overlook, I let you do it. I was so helpful to you. Couldn't you be a little grateful? You had

misappropriated so much of my money, but when in difficulty I wrote to you for a hundred rupees, you found it hard to send even this amount?

"Recently a dog came to our house. The dog and I are in no way related, nor could we have been related in any previous birth. If ever there was any relationship, it must have been through you. I fed him one day. Since then he has been coming to our house daily, whether we give him any food or not. He watches our house at night. The dog is a faithful animal.

"I now think of how many dogs I could have had with all the money I gave you."

This was the gist of the letter he had written to his maternal uncle; now that envelope must contain his uncle's reply. Sitarama Rao tore it open, enormously curious. He expected his uncle must have learnt his lesson. His uncle must have realized that he had helped him not in foolishness, but out of generosity; his uncle must be repenting at having cheated him; his letter must have cured his uncle; he must have written begging forgiveness, must have sent the hundred rupees by money order. The money order would come a day later than the letter.

With such thoughts he began reading the letter. The letter was a long one. His maternal uncle wrote thus –

Nayana! I have received your letter. I had also received your earlier letter, asking for a hundred rupees. As I did not wish to send you the hundred rupees, I thought it unnecessary to reply

to it. Today, I have received your second letter. I am glad you have expressed your mind. And gave me an opportunity to express mine.

I have been watching you for many days now. I knew your father and grandfather also. In your family you suffer from a delusion. You think your family is a special creation, and that you are superior to the rest. All of you have lust for flattery.

To fulfil that lust your family has done certain things, some good, and some bad.

Some have benefited by your generosity, but you are not aware that some others had to suffer your arrogance. When you were still a child and your mother was alive, I used to live in your house. Managing the property, accounting the income and expenditure, overseeing the farms, supervising the paid workers – these jobs were beneath the dignity of your father. Your father thought that some were born to lord it over, others to slave. Thinking we were good for these menial jobs, your father sent for me and handed over the management.

Nobody knows what we had to put up with and what we had to suffer in your house. Then we, that is, our family, were in some difficulties. So people sang your father's praises that he had given proof of his large heartedness by marrying my sister. Also, his taking me in was hailed as befitting only him. Only your mother, God bless her in her heavenly abode, knows how "happy" I was in your house!

Your father never treated us as his equals. He never considered

us equal to anyone born in his family. To him, we were always strangers, lesser people, dependants, servants. With one word, with one look, he would always remind us that we were lesser people. I don't say he did all this deliberately. The arrogance of "my family" was in his blood, and he had done all that quite unawares. It does not matter how he did, the consequence matters. The consequence was we suffered.

Ask your people if your father had ever allowed me to dine along with him. Many relatives used to come. But I never had the good fortune of sitting along with them for dinner and small talk. Sometimes, I had to serve them. When I brought in the serving plate, your father would ask, "Have you washed you hands?" In that query, in the way he looked at me asking that question, what acerbity, insolence, venom! I would be enraged within and wish I had thrown the plate at his face and gone away.

Until all of your people had had their meals, there would be no eating for us. After your people had finished their meals, after your aunt too had finished hers, and after giving them all pan, only then would my sister call me to eat, almost in stealth, "Come brother" she would whisper and give me food. Her fate, to play the thief in her own house!

Normally, I ate from a metal plate. I don't know why, but one day your mother served my meal on a leaf-plate. Noticing it, your father said, "Oh, you needed a leaf-plate after coming here!" What do you know how much your mother wept on

that day? "Brother, let's go away from here," she sobbed.

I consoled and calmed her, lest others should laugh at us.

Was your mother ever happy in your house?

If she was graceful and elegant on any day, your aunt would taunt, "After coming to our house you have learnt a lot! Seeing the tiger, the jackal branded itself and died of it!" If your mother was dirty doing housework, your aunt would comment, "Clean habits should come from birth, could they be learnt?"

The few days your mother lived – she lived a stranger in her own house! She had no liberty to give alms to a beggar, to give a meal to anyone. Even about what vegetables to cook she had to take orders from your aunt. And you know your aunt. What use blaming her? She had the same traits as the rest of your family.

Do you know why there was estrangement between her and her husband? Your father was responsible for it. She was said to quarrel with her husband every day, "My family is great, yours is good for nothing. They cut my throat by giving me to you!" Whatever he asked her to do she would not. She would say, "Have I ever had to do anything in my house?" Every now and then she sulked and came to your house. She would report against her husband to your father. And your father would go and abuse her husband.

In those days, whenever your aunt's husband spoke to your aunt or quarreled with her, he used to feel as if he were speaking to or quarrelling with your father! Sometimes, he would even

call her by your father's name! If she was by his side, it was like your father was by his side! He was fed up. He could no longer live with her.

One day, as your father was abusing him, he asked your father, "Have I married you or your sister?"

"Shut up!" your father bullied.

"Answer me. This should be cleared up today. With whom have I to live?" Your aunt's husband pinned him down.

"You don't have to live with either," your father said.

"Why not?"

"You haven't married anyone."

"Who married your sister?"

"My sister married you."

"It's not only your sister but you, your forefathers, your insolence – all combined and married me...turned into ghosts to haunt me, to take the life out of me!" cried your aunt's husband.

Then your father said unmentionable things, declared "My sister will stay with me," and took your aunt away to his house. Later, remorse followed, but your family pride came in the way of their reunion.

Nayana! Will any woman, who is such an insufferable snob, ever live well with her husband? Will traditional customs, habits, tastes and attitudes be alike in all families? It works only if one has sympathy for the other's views. But if one is

contemptuous of the other simply because the other's outlook is different, how can two individuals live together?

This is what had happened to your aunt. She stayed in your house ever since she had left her husband. As she had left her husband at a young age, so many of her desires remained unfulfilled that she nursed her temper, jealousy, hatred, and became surly. She would go out of the way to pick up quarrels. However quiet and meek we were, she would always have something to find fault with us and tell your father about it. And your father would chide us. If he merely chastised us it would have been all right, he was an elder, we would bear it. But his constant refrain was, "How dare you talk back to my sister?" She was his sister, born in his family, and so she was superior. We were outsiders, born in another family, and so we were inferior. We shouldn't say anything to her. It's for your people to insult, for us to bear.

This was how we lived in your house. At last, your mother conceived you. And her gloom ended. She became radiant again, forgot all her troubles. When you were born, it was as if she was born again. But as you grew, she became gloomy again. One day, with tears in her eyes, she told me, "Brother, he is not like us. He takes after his father!"

After that I watched you carefully. What she said was true! All your father's traits could be seen in you. Even as a child you tried to imitate him. You would climb a chair and swing your legs like your father. Coming into the inner rooms you

would order us about.

Sometimes your father used to look around like a lunatic. Suddenly you too would do so. While talking, your father would comb his whiskers with his right hand. Even as a child you used to imitate this mannerism. All your people were delighted. Proudly, your father would brush his whiskers and ask, "Will a kitten be born to a tiger?"

Your mother would talk to me in private and weep. "He is exactly like his father ..."

And what she had feared came true. A mother she was, she could foresee the problems ahead. She was lucky and passed away, without having to see you grow and suffer. And then I came away.

You may wonder. If I had to suffer so much in your house why did I have to stay there for so long? I had stayed for the sake of my sister. After seeing the state of affairs in your house, I found it risky to leave her there alone. Had I not stayed along with her in your house, she would not have lived for long. And as long as she was there, I had to put up with all the indignities meted out to me.

"When she saw the humiliation I had to suffer at the hands of your father and aunt, she would beg of me, "Brother, please go away. Don't stay here any more."

"What about you?"

"I have no choice."

"I too shall think so as long as you are here," I would say.

My stay at your house was more of an advantage to your family than to mine. Day and night I slogged on your farms and saw to it that the work went on. I collected the dues without the loss of even a pie.

But what use? While I toiled hard to save money, your father sat smug and spent it as he pleased. Occasionally it would occur to me, "Why all this labour? For whose benefit am I slaving away?" Then I changed ...

This is all past history. Let me now turn to the points in your letter.

I had to recall the past to make it easier for you to understand the present state of affairs. There is no other intention.

Although I am far away, I have been keeping an eye on you, especially after your father passed away. When I saw the company you kept, and your crazy yearning for fame, I concluded that you wouldn't be able to keep your property for long. What was the use of my repaying the debt with interest to a person who didn't know how to retain it anyway? Except that I would be the loser? Once, while your father was alive, I had made a similar mistake. So, this time I was careful. Calling you here, I settled your debt. You know how it all happened.

As I had correctly guessed, like your father you accepted the land worth ten thousand for the settlement of the forty thousand debt, and nursed your family pride. You were duly praised by all and sundry here.

But I believe that the ten acres was my gift to you. You write as if you had helped me by accepting ten acres for forty thousand. If you try and recall, you will know whether it was you or I who had lost in the bargain. But for the foolish slip of your aunt's tongue, you would have written off the debt, on that day, for nothing, for the sake of your family pride. You had, in fact, said you would render such help even to strangers, even if you couldn't earn for yourself. Then, tell me what help did you render me in particular? Helping others is a vice with you. It is clear from your own words that you enjoyed helping others even at a loss to you. You had used me for your own pleasure. And when you used me for your own pleasure, is there any point in your abusing, "You are ungrateful; I did it all for your sake?"

Not only that, there is another important thing. Do you know to whom this forty thousand belongs? You didn't earn it; your father hadn't earned it. It is ours. It is the money we had given during my sister's wedding, our own money which earned interest. She is no more. Our money is back with us. What is it you have given? What is it I have taken? Moreover, ten acres I gave you as my nephew. You may ask, "Isn't my mother's money mine?" Yes, of course, yours, provided you don't misuse it. Since you couldn't keep it, it is best with us where it originally belonged. This money is not like yours. It is hard-earned. It is earned by the use of brain and the sweat of brow.

Babu, recently your father-in-law came to us. He informed us in some detail about your position and your doings. I advised him not to pin any hopes on you and to go about as if you were not there. In fact, he is not worried about you. He is only afraid the children will be spoilt if they stay with you. Poor man, what can he do? When he asked his daughter to come away with the children, she did not agree.

This is one of the strangest things in this world. Good women become wives of men like you. May be the joy in a life of ups and downs is not there in an even one. After listening to what her father had to say, your wife, it appears, said, "You are right, father. But, if I come away, his life will be more miserable. Let things happen as they will."

"Why this regard for him? He won't be happy, he won't let others be happy!" your father-in-law said.

"Father, he is a great man. Lives of all great men are like that. If we measure them with the same scale as we use for ordinary men, we can't understand them," your wife said.

See! You are supposed to be a great man! Can you believe it?

Wives of men like you don't desert – men like you humiliate their wives – so their self-confidence becomes a casualty. To make their husbands happy is their ultimate goal in life. They are content with an abject existence.

The attitude of wives happy with their husbands is different. They have a good opinion of themselves. If they are unhappy,

they blame themselves; or consider how much better off they will be with another, and go away.

But desertion is wrong for us; surrender is great. Your wife won't leave you; all her life she will suffer at your hands and stay with you; she will proclaim your greatness. Just as I left you to your fate, her father too left her to hers …

Nayana! I have money. But I won't give you any. Anyway, why do you need money, wretched money! Can't you maintain your family prestige without money? We are money-men, you are fame-men. If you don't have money, you can live on your fame. If we do not have money, we cannot live at all.

You write the dog is a faithful animal. Yes, dogs are like that. Your experience is not enough, yet. That is why elders talk of "a dog's mentality." Anyway who cares to be a dog? And me, of all persons? Oh, no, having lived in your house so long and learnt so much, will I ever make such a mistake? Oh, no!

Nayana! Everyone has to pay for his weakness and ignorance. You have to reap the consequences of your actions. What is the use of abusing others? To be jealous of others, to attribute your troubles to others' narrow-mindedness, to find excuses for your weaknesses and mistakes, to make others the target of your temper just because you yourself have bungled, is not something that an educated man like you, a large-hearted man, a lover of fame, should do. It will be an affront to your family respect and ancestral pride.

The river of life rushes on at a terrible speed. Everyone struggles in it for happiness according to his merit. It is a fierce battle. There is no place for the cowardly and the incompetent in it.

At the railway booking window, crowds jostle to get their tickets. They scramble, everyone wanting to get his ticket first. This scene comes to my mind whenever I think of the struggle of life. Each one frets for his own ticket. No one thinks of others. Legs are crushed, shirts are torn. Nobody finds it wrong. None is ashamed. Everyone's eye is on the ticket. One comes with iron feet, pushes others, treads on them and reaches the window. Coming last, he gets his ticket first.

The incompetent and the cowardly stand at a distance and watch the struggle. They too have to catch the train, they too need their tickets. But they can't even try for them. Moreover they content themselves with putting down those engaged in the struggle as vulgar, selfish and dishonest. Whoever they are, whatever their outlook, it is they who will get their tickets; it is they who will board the train. If it is essential to catch the train, it is essential to do all those things. Then all those things turn out to be good. And those that stand apart, staring at the crowds, jealously eyeing the ticket-getters, criticizing the railway authorities, they have to remain where they are!

They can nurse their lofty ideals; their train will go its way.

Nayana! Listen to me, to an old man. Don't write to me

any more, but find out a place where your ability can be of some use.

As he finished reading the letter, Sitarama Rao grew agitated. The world seemed to be whirling. He was afraid to look at the letter again. Every word in it became a dagger thrust into his chest. His uncle used to be very fond of him and used to shower love on him! All that love and affection, was it merely put on? Just to gain his own ends? All these days how could he hide so much venom in his breast! His own maternal uncle! Were all men like that? Those who praised him, who made friends with him, had they all had one thing on their mind but pretended to have another? Who should one believe in? Whose word to take to be true?

Once when he was at his maternal uncle's, an incident had occurred. By then, he had already got into financial difficulties and had started feeling sorry for having settled his uncle's debt of forty thousand for ten acres. Some people had already begun to count him among the incompetent, and were secretly laughing behind his back.

Talking of this and that his uncle's sudra servant told him, "That land you were given was the northern one. It touches filth. Unless you spend at least two hundred an acre, you cannot raise anything on it ... The southern land of course is a piece of gold."

He was shocked to hear of it. His uncle had never even mentioned it. He had helped his uncle so much, would he

dupe him? So he had thought.

"Uncle is a farmer and should know. Why didn't he have it mended?" he asked the sudra servant.

"I don't know, Sir. The rest of the land he would treat as he would a baby. Whenever we mentioned the northern land he would lose his temper."

"Won't the yield improve with repairs?"

"Why not? Maybe he left it for you to have it done," said the sudra servant.

Sitarama Rao was stunned to hear this. His uncle must have been waiting a long time to settle his huge debt against this piece of land! Sure of palming it off on him and fixing any price for it, he must have considered it a waste to have it repaired.

Sitarama Rao had always been ready to make a sacrifice for the sake of his uncle but how meanly his uncle behaved!

The same evening he had come across the village karanam.[1] The enmity between his uncle and the karanam was such that even a blade of green grass between them would catch fire. After the greetings, the karanam enquired, "That northern land your uncle gave you in settlement of debt, do you remember how much it was?"

"Oh, yes, I do. Ten acres."

"Before it was transferred to your name, did you have it surveyed?"

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1. A village official in charge of revenue and records.

He hadn't felt the need for it. "I don't exactly remember it. Why, was it not surveyed? It must have been."

"Must have been! There shouldn't be such omissions between uncle and nephew. But when I had to measure it the other day for some reason, I found it was only nine acres and ten cents. That's why I just wanted to know."

From there he went to the library. He met an old friend there and both of them went on a stroll to the canal bank. His friend told him more about his uncle. "Listen to me … You give your land on tenancy to someone else. As along as it is with your uncle you won't get a pie. I am telling you for your own good," his friend said.

"Why, convince me and I shall do as you advise."

His friend told him –

His uncle rented the land at a very low rate to men compliant to him, men who worked for him at his home, men who helped him in the village. He never bothered to check whether the tenants took good care of the land or not. He allowed the dues to run into arrears, never collecting them regularly. Recently, he himself had taken four acres of it and planted sugarcane. Sugarcane fetched more money but ruined the field. So, instead of planting the cane in his own fields, he had done it in Sitarama Rao's fields but paid only the usual tenancy. If the prices were low and he was in need of money, he sold Sitarama Rao's grain to tide over. And as the prices fell further, he sold his own grain, but substituted the deal in Sitarama

Rao's account and accordingly remitted the dues to him.

In this way, his friend went on relating the deceptions his uncle perpetrated. Sitarama Rao's blood boiled as he listened to all this. He was not sorry for having lost money. He was agitated that a man of his stature should have been so duped!

His friend's words wounded his heart. The world appeared topsy-turvy. Hurt and brooding he returned to his uncle's.

Looking at his manner his aunt enquired, "Babu, what's the matter?"

Recounting all that he had heard, he asked, "Aunt, is this fair?"

Flaring up at her husband when he returned, she said, "It is not fair to cheat a boy. Instead of giving him our money, should we take his?" she demanded. "He is innocent, a mere boy. He helped us in our need. Look how he is suffering! It is not good for us to cause him pain," she said.

His uncle had some defence or the other against every attack. "Words are useless. Those who don't like us tell tales. Accounts are clear to the pie. Ask him to check." He placed in front of Sitarama Rao the account books.

But what could Sitarama Rao check? He had the habit of writing a diary, not accounts. He did not even remember what sums he had received. Then how could he verify the accounts? He sat still.

"Take a look," said the uncle.

"What's there for me to see?"

"Giving ear to all and sundry, you have accused me of misappropriating your moneys. After your mother's death, do you know what all I had to go through to save this land? Ask anyone how hard your father had tried to take possession of this land, seeking support of the other party! Fearing that this piece of land too might not be left for you, I had to fight hard to keep it and became an enemy to all of them," said the uncle.

"That's true. He bore many insults for your sake," echoed the aunt.

"Have I denied it, aunt ..." said Sitarama Rao.

"Then why all this fuss? From this day onwards you take care of your land yourself," the uncle said.

"Enough of your threat!" the aunt said. "As if there is no one else to take care of his land! All this fuss just because he told us what the villagers were talking! Come in child, what have we to do with him? I haven't fried even a piece of gare[2] since you came. I must do it this afternoon," so saying his aunt took him aside, seated him on the stool for an anointed headbath[3] and soaked the black gram.

At that time he had thought there was none like his aunt. Now, as he recalled the incident, the whole thing appeared to

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2. Telugue garé is better known in the rest of India as vada; a fry made of black gram soaked and ground.

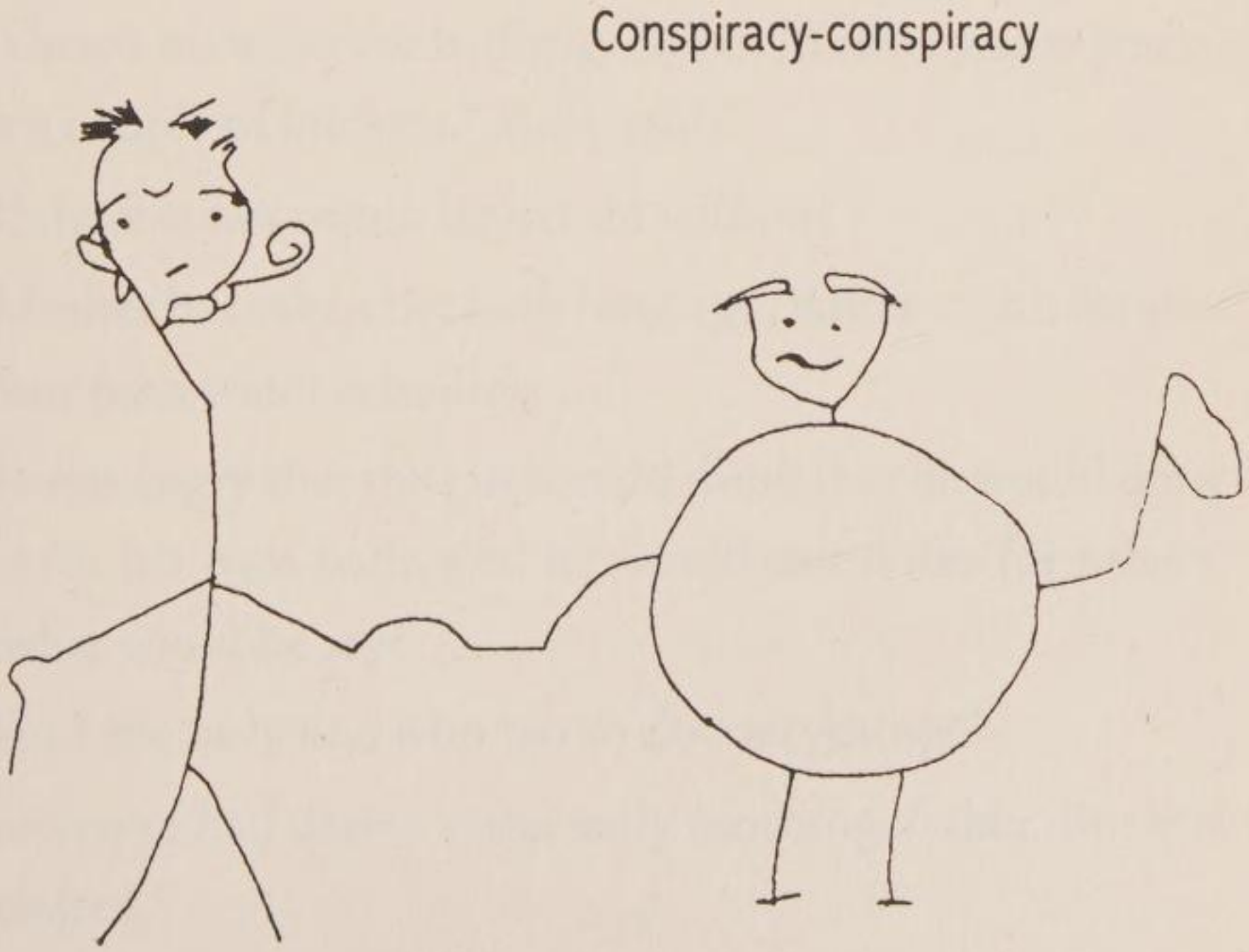
3. The head is anointed and massaged with oil; so also the rest of the body. This is followed by an elaborate bath.

be a confidence act. Both of them had combined to cheat him. In the night they would talk among themselves what to say, and say it in the day. As he recalled, he resented it all. Everyone in the world was cheating him. To the illiterate, the foolish, the silly – to all he was fair game.

He picked up pen and paper to write a fiery letter to his uncle. But what was there to write? What reply could he give to his uncle's letter?

He felt offended that his father-in-law should talk it over with his uncle. What could he do?

He drew this figure –




The meeting of the Father-in-law and the Maternal Uncle

# *The Bungler's Valour*

The maternal uncle's letter set off a volcano in Sitarama Rao's heart. He hated himself, and started petty fault-finding.

"Why are you standing there?" Sitarama Rao demanded of his daughter who was standing at the door.

"There's no water for bathing, father. Mother wants you to draw a couple of buckets," Baby said.

"If there is not water, let her do without."

"Mother has taken her bath long ago, father ... It's for you ... Your bath water is boiling ..."

He was angry that the girl should think that he would draw water for his own bath, and he would not do so for others. But what could he say?

"Am I the only one who has to do everything?"

"Seenayya had drawn water early morning, father. But it is all finished."

Now he had a reason to vent his anger. "You had enough

water drawn for all of you. I have to draw for myself. Is that so?" He glowered at her.

"No, father … Today mother is not well … She could not draw water. And the water-tap has been out of order for the last four days."

"Shut up! You've learnt one thing: always backing your mother! Are you the only one with a mother …" He got up.

He drew water from the well in two pots and, holding each in a hand, carried them into the kitchen. His wife was taking a little rice out of the cooking pot on the fire with a ladle, and was pressing the grain between her fingers to see if it was cooked right.

Panting he asked, "Where shall I pour this water?"

"Put the pots in the bathroom."

He found it hard to go from there to the bathroom. As he carried the load in both the hands, his shoulders were aching. He would not have found it so bad had he gone straight to the bathroom.

"Couldn't you have told me earlier? Instead of telling me after I brought the water here?" he asked.

"I thought Baby had told you."

True, he recalled it now. Baby had told him. When he had to admit his mistake he became even angrier.

"What if Baby has told me? Couldn't you have told me again? Will you wither away for that? Or pearls will fall down

from your mouth?" So saying, he took the vessels to the bathroom. As he entered, his head hit the door-frame. After pouring the water in the huge metal cauldron, as he came out a crow dived and kicked at his head.

The crow had made its nest on the coconut palm, and felt threatened that the nest might be removed.

But was it kicking at everyone? His wife would walk that way many times, but it never touched her. It wouldn't touch even Baby. But him, it kicked at every chance. The other day it had kicked the enadi[1] man also. What would the crow be thinking of him? Who did it think he was? Did it think he was a man who stabbed at nests with a spear to kill birds and eat them? It then occurred to him that he was not wearing a shirt. But was the shirt the only difference between him and the enadi man? He was furious that the crow did not know him. He thought of punishing it by removing the nest, but he did not know how to climb the coconut palm.

Again the crow hit his head. He was enraged at his wife. "Chi! A miserable house! ... It's difficult even to live in this house. Not a moment's peace," he shouted loudly, to make sure his wife heard him. Even as he was shouting, he rushed out of that spot and entered the side lane, lest the crow should hit him again.

His daughter came in running and spotting him, stopped and stood still, with fear on her face. Behind her came bustling

1. a tribe.

the erikala[2] woman living in a hut at the back of their house, who complained, "Look, Sir, your daughter struck my girl! Will you break our bones just because we are poor? We are also human!"

Sitarama Rao was scared of her. She had a foul tongue. She was a terror not only to him, but to everyone around. She would first unleash her tongue; she knew no difference between the high and low. No use repenting later.

He was annoyed with his daughter that she should have picked up trouble with such people.

"Why did you beat her?"

The daughter was trembling with fear, not a word could she utter.

"Speak up!" he roared at her.

She stood staring at him. Her mind was not on the question, so it seemed from her looks. Sensing the impending danger she had become rigid with fear.

His heart melted at her frightened looks, at her helplessness. He wanted to take her in his arms and say, "Why are you afraid? I was only joking."

But what to do? The erikala woman was standing there, watching him. What to tell her? If he did not pacify her, she would make a scene in the market place. What all wouldn't she say! A quarrel with her! After all his life! And how to

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2. a nomadic community.

avoid a quarrel? And her tongue!

"Why don't you open your mouth? Speak up, why did you beat her? Will you speak? Or won't you?" He struck her.

The girl was too terrified to open her mouth. She stood staring at him.

He struck her again, but she did not cry. Why didn't she cry? Why didn't she tell him, "Father, don't strike me!"

This time he was really angry. The savage in him was roused. "Speak up … Will you or will you not? … Will you stay away from them? Will you? … Will you?" He struck her again and again.

The daughter couldn't bear the beating any more. She opened her mouth and said, "She hit me first, father!"

At that he was stunned. Had he beaten her unnecessarily? Had it all been a mistake? Why hadn't she said so earlier? He was even more angry that she had got him into striking her brutally, without first telling him the truth.

"Why didn't you say so earlier? Why didn't you answer me first?" He struck her again.

The erikala woman kept standing there. She was afraid that the blame might fall on her daughter. She said, "Oho! You are not finger-high, but what lies you tell! Didn't I see? Pulling her hair, pinning her down, didn't you hit her with your fists? And when I came, didn't you run away?"

"No father, no. I was coming from the bazaar … And she

was stealing sapota from our backyard. I stopped her … She struck me …" the daughter said.

The erikala woman opened up, "Oho! Now you accuse us of stealing! As if all these days we have been eating your food! From where else do we get anything to eat?"

He was afraid. There was no stopping her tongue. What to do? How to stop her?

"If she struck you, would you strike her back?" He struck his daughter again. The erikala woman was still standing there. She seemed to have no intention of leaving. Perhaps she wanted to see him hit his daughter some more. His anger turned on the erikala woman. His blood boiled that she had made him unnecessarily strike his daughter. "Why are you still standing there? Haven't I beaten my daughter? You may go now," he told her.

"Ayyo! Have I asked you to hit your daughter? I have merely said that she hit my girl. What a fate! … What have we to come here for? … As my girl was hit, I came here simply to inform …" so grumbling the erikala woman turned back.

Afraid of what more he might have to hear from that woman if he stayed on, he went inside the house.

Near the threshold the crow struck him again.

When his temper cooled, he felt sorry that he had beaten his daughter. His heart ached as he recalled the scene. She standing there mute, helpless, he striking her again and again, tears

welling in her eyes, yet not the slightest sound escaping from her – how dreadful it all was! He hated himself. It was like the cat cornering the mouse. What was his daughter's fault? Should he have struck her simply because he was afraid of the erikala woman? His daughter put up with anything he did. He had behaved as he had because she wouldn't resist!

Pity overtook him. He wanted to press his daughter to his heart. He decided to atone for the punishment he had unjustly inflicted on her. He called his daughter. She came in, slowly, scared, halting, wiping her eyes. Her eyes were red. He guessed she had been crying, telling her mother about it. He made her lie down in his bed.

"Baby, why didn't you speak when I had first asked?"

She did not reply. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"Please tell me. I won't hurt you. Tell me," he asked her fondly.

"I was afraid you would strike me, father…" she said, wiping her tears.

He did not know what to do. He did not understand why he had to live on like this, frightening the children. He was becoming a thorn in the flesh of his own children.

"You could have told me. But why did you have to strike her back?"

Father's kindness gave her a little courage. Looking at him, she said, "The other day when I had told you, you said, 'Why tell me? If she strikes you, you strike her back.'"

It was true. He never liked getting involved in children's quarrels. Now they played, now they quarrelled. He thought it wrong of adults to get into their quarrels. Children should learn to stand on their own feet. Or else, when they grew to be adults, they would not have the courage to face the problems of life. If they were taught to depend on adults they would not be able to think and do things by themselves when they grew up.

That was why he had told his daughter to strike back if struck. But the result? The other day, he himself had told her to hit back if hit, and today, when she followed his advice, he punished her.

Tears welled up in his eyes.

He could not understand anything. At one time, he thought this was right. Another moment, he would think that was right. He would say something one moment. The next, he would act exactly opposite.

At one time, he had considered it very wrong to strike children, a great sin. He was surprised how parents could ever beat their children. "What do children know? They are innocent. What is the use of beating them? Nobody with a heart would ever do it," so he had thought. But recently, he had come to the conclusion that children ought to be beaten. He even mustered arguments in favour of it. "Children won't be controlled by words. To discipline them, it is necessary to frighten them. The only way to put fear into children is to use

the rod. Parents who spare the rod spoil the children. If children are allowed to grow as they please, they become good for nothing, vagabonds. You can bend a plant, not a tree."

It seemed even wise people had thought so. The leaders who wanted to usher in socialism inflicted pain, violence and even death on their opponents, to implement their ideologies. If using violence against adults was not wrong, how could it be wrong in the case of children? According to this theory, the strong could punish the weak, the husband could punish the wife, the learned could punish the ignorant. Why need this punishment necessarily be for the victim's benefit? If it was for selfish ends, what could the victim do? What could Sitarama Rao's daughter do now?

"Baby!"

"Yes, father."

"Why are you restless?"

"My hand is aching, father," said the daughter. It was the same hand he had hit.

He couldn't speak for a while. Gently massaging her hand he said, "Look, Baby ... These vulgar people, they are not decent, their tongues are no good. We should play with our equals, not go with them. We shall get into bad habits. They don't care what we say. But we'll be plagued to death by their words. Don't mix with them ..."

"I won't, father."

But even before he had completed the sentence, he suddenly remembered what he had said the other day, when his wife was telling his daughter not to mix with all and sundry low class people. He had said, "What's wrong in it? Aren't they human? Children should mix with all. They should learn everything. It is good to gain experience early, to know various attitudes."

Which of these two was really his opinion? Which was better for his daughter? "Oh, God!" he pressed his temples.

The more he thought, the clearer it became to him that there was a very close relationship between pity and anger. His soft heart was responsible for his miseries, his ways. Stony hearts were not prone to anger, pity, joy or revulsion, they did not have any feelings at all. They did everything in the same manner.

He was different. He succumbed to every emotion. In whatever shape it burst out, the source was the same: his soft heart, his merciful nature. Inability to turn a blind eye to the suffering of others was the main cause of his malady.

While playing, his daughter would fall and cry. He could not bear her crying, he could not look at her tearful face, he would feel all cut up inside, he would lose his temper and beat her till she stopped crying.

What was the reason for his violence? His kind heart which could not bear the crying? Or cruelty? As he beat her, only cruelty would be seen, not the pity and pain behind it.

His wife would work day and night, and fall ill. He would

scold her for having invited illness. Those who heard him scolding her would think of him as very cruel. But what was it that made him lose his temper? Wasn't it his soft heart?

His soft heart, his inability to ignore the suffering of others – this was his fault. His own good nature had become his enemy, the enemy of his family. Another question struck him, "What is soft heartedness?"

"Nervous weakness," a friend had once told him. "When the nerves are weak, man is moved by every little happening outside. This is what our people call 'heart.' The weaker the nerves, the softer the heart."

This had surprised him. Some people shed copious tears at witnessing the least sign of injustice perpetrated. Was it due to their nervous weakness? Not due to their good nature? He would be hurt at every little thing, worry, go hungry, and debate about it day and night! This pain, this worry, this torture – was it all due to nervous weakness? Not due to his soft heart? Not even due to his being more intelligent than the circumstances warranted?

He was annoyed. Sternly, he asked himself –

"Why have my nerves lost strength?"

"Because of constant brooding."

"Why do I brood so much?"

"Because you do not do any work."

"Why is it I do not feel like doing any work?"

"Because of circumstances."

"What is my duty?"

"Change the circumstances."

"How can I? To change the circumstances, one should be properly inclined. To be so inclined, the circumstances should change. What am I to do? What is the way out? How to come out of this? How to tear asunder this padmavyuham?[3]

He felt the whole world had ganged up to harass him; he was bearing the weight of the entire world. By the sheer weight of feelings he was sinking into a bottomless pit. There was no one to save him, no one to listen to him, no one to understand him. He was distressed. He wanted to weep in his wife's lap like a child, wanted to tell her of his suffering, anxiety, joys and sorrows, wanted to beg forgiveness and say, "I want to live well, I want to make you happy. But I do not know how to." He hoped that baring his heart to her might give him peace of mind. Hope gave him strength.

"Baby –" he called.

"Yes, father?"

"Is it still aching?"

"A little less now, father."

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3. Classical (Sanskrit) military term; lotus formation in battle; here the allusion is to the Kurukshetra war in the epic *Mahabharata*, where the mighty warrior Abhimanyu broke into the lotus formation of the enemy but did not know how to come out and consequently died fighting.

"I never thought it would hurt so much. I lost my temper . . ."

"Let it be, father."

"Can you get up?"

"Why not, father?"

"Will you ask your mother to serve the meal?"

"Why not, father?"

Sitting before his meal he made an attempt to express his love for his wife. But he did not know how to begin.

As usual, she was serving him without talking much. Eating with bent head, he said, "Today the ridge-cucumber curry is good."

She did not say anything. He was observing her movements.

"You seem to have cooked it in a new way?"

She did not say anything.

"Why not cook like this always?"

She did not say anything.

"Why don't you say something?"

"I've cooked it as usual."

He felt miserable. Instead of being so curt, why couldn't she speak with a smile on her lips. He had said the curry was good. Couldn't she be a little glad? This was the trouble with her. She behaved as if she had nothing to do with anything.

"You are wearing a laundered sari today!" he said with a smile.

She did not say anything. But he suspected she scowled.

She knew that he hated those who scowled. Still she did it, perhaps on purpose. He pulled himself together and enquired, "Aren't you well?"

"Why not? I am all right," she said.

"Then why are you like that?" he was beginning to be irritated …

"Like what?"

He was getting angry. She was always like that. However much he tried to be good she would not allow it. The more he tried to get near her the more she moved away from him. How decent today he had wanted to be! She wouldn't give him a chance to talk. Suddenly, she would pour a pot of cold water over him. What was his fault? Why did she scowl? Why did she speak so perversely?

"You seem to be ill …"

"I am not ill. I am well, as ever," she said.

He was annoyed. If you tried to be nice to women you only cheapened yourself, so he felt. Having first given her the liberty, he was paying for it now. Would she have become like this had he not spoilt her with talk of freedom and equality? She would have been like the rest of them. She would have been docile, done what she was told. If she did not, he would break her bones.

"Have a little more of the curry," she said.

"No."

"You said it was good!"

"So, have I to eat it till my belly bursts? I can't. That is what your father does, what you do," he said, losing his temper.

She was perplexed, pained that he should drag her father into it. "Why speak of my father," she said.

"My pleasure. I'll speak of him whenever I please. Who are you to stop me?" he said angrily.

She could not understand why he was angry. What had she done? Her very appearance irritated him, life was becoming impossible for her. It was her habit to go out of his presence when he was angry. She was about to do so.

"Has it become difficult for you even to stand here? You think it's enough to throw some food at me? I don't want it, I won't eat," he shouted at her, pushed away the plate, rose to his feet.

She was stunned.

"Why? Why do you stare like that? Am I a devil? Ghost? Demon?" he cried.

She was silent.

"Why don't you speak?"

"What have I to speak?"

He was furious, he raved. "What? Nothing? Nothing at all to speak to me? All right, keep this in mind," he flew into a frenzy and rushed out.

She slumped on her haunches.

He was confused. Why had he left his meal? What did he achieve? What had he planned? What did he do? He had wanted to be nice to his wife, wanted to tell her about his joys and sorrows, wanted to win the sympathy of at least one person in this wide world. Not only had he failed, but instead, he had ended up quarrelling. Whose fault was it? He lay brooding.

A gecko was crawling on the wall. He got up, stood opposite to it, and spoke to it.

"Are you happy?"

The gecko stopped.

"I am not," he told the gecko.

The gecko moved.

"Do you lose your temper?"

The gecko stopped.

"I do," he told the gecko.

The gecko moved.

"Gecko!"

The gecko stopped.

"You have worries?"

The gecko moved.

"I have," he told the gecko.

The gecko stopped.

"Gecko, you and I have some affinity. Once upon a time I too was happy, carefree, catching insects. Now, look at my

plight. But I am in you and you are in me."

The gecko moved.

"Gecko!"

The gecko did not stop.

"Sister!"

The gecko ran.

Sitarama Rao was alarmed.

He was feeling hungry, hoped his wife would come to coax him. He waited long but she did not come. He was very hungry, but how could he go in uninvited? He himself had come away, rejecting the food. How could he go in now and ask for it? If he did, what would his wife think of him? Why had he got into this trouble?

In the past was she so indifferent as now? She used to come and coax him. "If you don't eat, I won't." she would say. She would cry. She would even feed him. She had changed completely. What was she doing?

He wondered if she was eating.

He went into the kitchen, as though for water. The plate he had pushed aside was still there. The kitchen was as he had left it. His wife remained slumped at the threshold. She had not eaten. He was annoyed that she had not eaten. She had not eaten to take revenge on him. She was in an advanced state of pregnancy! Shouldn't she be careful about her health? Didn't she know that? Oh, yes if she knew, she wouldn't be a woman,

she would have been born a man.

Hurriedly, he picked up a tumbler, filled it with water and drank. He hit the tumbler on the floor, "You find it difficult even to give me water? Even for water I have to come into the kitchen, pick up the glass, fill it from the pitcher, drink it, and then put the glass back in its proper place?"

She sighed, rose to her feet and started putting the vessels back in place. His anger mounted.

"Then, it doesn't matter if I don't eat?" he asked.

"..."

"It is good for you that I don't eat!"

"..."

"In fact, you don't want me to be happy."

"..."

"It will be much better for you if I die. Less expense. Good riddance. There won't be any more trouble. You can live happily with the children. No one to find fault with you."

When she didn't react even to this, he flew into a rage –

"I won't eat."

"..."

"I say I won't eat."

Quietly, she was arranging the vessels back in place, as if she had not heard him at all. He was frightened at her attitude, scared not knowing what was on her mind.

"Why are you putting the things back? Why not do it after

eating?"

"..."

"Is this part of your marital fidelity?"

"..."

"I'll go. You eat in secret."

"..."

"Oh, yes! If you eat, how will people know that I am torturing you?"

She was putting back the dishes. If she replied, he would have a chance of getting the muck out of his system. He would have had his vengeance. But it did not happen. So the anger was burning him within, moving in circles, throwing up sparks.

He did not know what to do with her. He couldn't find a way of getting any reaction from her. He stood staring at her. He waited till she finished putting things back, and then announced, "I'll eat."

She did not speak.

"I am speaking to you," he said.

She stood still.

"Won't you serve me?" he asked. "Oh, yes! Why will you serve me!"

She did not move.

His anger vanished. He pitied himself. He was asking for food and she was silent.

Anger deserted him, self-respect died. When she was silent, could he not go away? What if he missed a meal? He might go to the bazaar and take coffee. To eat food cooked by his wife was not the only way of satisfying his hunger. So, he kept thinking but did not feel like going out.

"I am hungry. Don't you have pity on me?" he said. Tears rolled from his eyes involuntarily.

She was unmoved. His anger, kindness, love, sorrow – they were all the same to her. That these differing emotions had the same source, she must have known and that was why she no longer paid any attention to these outbursts. Or else, she could not have lived with him at all.

"Won't you serve me?" Sitarama Rao asked, his voice trembled.

She began serving his meal again.

"Will you give water washing my feet? Or shall I fetch it myself?" he asked.

She was about to go to get the goblet.

"Don't bother, I'll get it." He went ahead of her, filled the goblet with water from the huge metal cauldron, washed his feet, came in and sat down.

She served his meal. He ate, shuffling the food about in the plate. He was beginning to be annoyed again. He had given in, she had won. Frantically, he thought of covering up his discomfiture, preserving his self-respect. As if he ate not for his own sake, but for hers, he washed his hands and went out,

saying, "All right, you've won! I've done as you've wished! Now are you satisfied?"

She did not move her lips. Whatever was she thinking! But was she thinking at all? Mechanically, she was putting back the pots.

"What is it you have done?" Sitarama Rao asked himself. He himself did not like what he had done. When he was doing something, he knew it was not right and yet he could not desist from doing it. On the one hand, he would be thinking it wrong, on the other he would go on with it. What he was doing he could not consider right, and what he felt right he was not able to do. Why? What was this riddle? Was it a conflict between matter and soul? What was he? Matter? Or soul? Or both, pulling in different directions? Matter seemed to be stronger than soul. Soul kept muttering in a corner like an old hag, but who cared? Matter went its own way.

He kept thinking. There was a method of thinking, even for those who did not know how to live methodically. There were no thoughts which could not be bound by a method. Because that method itself was responsible for the birth and growth of those thoughts. Some thought they could think as they pleased. How unwise! Was their pleasure in their hands? Wasn't there a method in their pleasure?

Where his thoughts were concerned, one was born of another; from another, yet another. Like climbing a staircase,

he went up step by step. He did not know why he was climbing. There was no destination. As he kept climbing, there appeared more and more steps. One might stop climbing out of fatigue, but there were plenty of steps for the climbers. For some, the climbing itself was a delight. Destination didn't matter, nor was there the question why they were climbing at all. But Sitarama Rao's case was different. He would be tired, but he would not stop to rest. Moreover, the more tired he was, the faster he wanted to climb.

"What is it you have done?" Sitarama Rao asked his image in the mirror. "And why have you done it?" he asked himself, looking out of the window. "How mean you are!" he looked at himself and was shocked. "I'll punish you for what you have done," he started beating his chest with his fists, first with one hand, and then with both. Blow after blow, blow after blow. Suddenly, he noticed there was no movement in the house. He was afraid that his wife had committed suicide, unable to bear with him any more. He wanted to go and look into the well. But, what if she was there busy with something? What would she think of his fear? How silly he would be! Were she to come to know of his weakness, would she let him alone? Would he be able to live with her for a moment? Like the crow which had built the nest, he wouldn't have a moment's peace. Thus thinking, he went to the well, casually whistling. But he was afraid to look into the well. He looked at the custard-apple tree. It was planted by his father, and gave fruit

in all seasons. All the fruit was not of the same size. Some very small and some quite large. Like the human offspring, all the fruit of a tree did not survive. Some fell off, some were spoilt by the squirrel's pecking. Maybe even the trees had miscarriages.

He laughed, for no reason at all. Still he could not pick up the courage to look into the well. He hated women. If they wanted to die, why should they have to jump into a well or pour kerosene and set themselves ablaze? Couldn't they die properly? How many easier ways there were! Wasn't there electricity at hand? Jumping into the well, someone pulling out the corpse by the hair and putting it on the ground, legs falling apart, hands askew, lying on the back as if looking at the sky to count the stars! How grotesque! How hateful! How vulgar! They might have thought "Who cares what happens after death? We won't see it!" But wasn't it to achieve something? Wasn't it their intention to have their husbands condemned? To have them pointed out by people in the market place, "It's him, it's him?" Women were a constant reminder how very near animals human beings were.

With wrath against women, he picked up courage. Suddenly, he peeped into the well. He saw bubbles. His heart beat faster. It looked as though hair was floating on the water. But that was hay dropped by children.

It had not occurred to him before that there was such close resemblance between hay and women's hair.

He was annoyed with his wife. Needlessly, what anguish she had caused him! She was coming in from the backyard. He grew furious to see her. She had worried him so much, yet she was coming in demurely as if quite innocent. She had been quite all right and very much at home, and yet what worry she had caused him! Baby was following her.

He went straight to his wife and asked her, "What are you doing here?"

She was silent.

"Why don't you speak?"

"What's there to speak? I am going into the house," she said. She was looking at him from head to foot.

Those looks reminded him of his pet dog. The dog too used to look at him like that. There was no meaning in those looks. It was as if to examine him, to find out the secrets of his heart.

"Why do you look at me like that?" he demanded.

Baby trembled and hid herself behind her mother.

She did not say anything. His dog was also like that! Even if he snubbed, it wouldn't leave him, wouldn't stop watching him. The dog would give him an I-know-you look.

If he struck it, it would cry kuyyokuyyo, but continue looking at him as before.

"Why, will you hit me?" he demanded.

"Why will I hit you!"

Why that despair? His dog was also like that. He lost his temper.

"Then, I'll hit you," he slapped her hard. Baby screamed, but his wife stood still, and kept staring at him.

He had hit... he had hit his wife! His body trembled in terror, he panted. He had hit! He could not see anything around him, he was dazed. He felt his nerves breaking down.

He had hit... he had hit his wife!

Jutkas were running in the bazaar. Everyone was busy with his business. The world went on as usual. The sun would set in the west, rise in the east. Wasn't there any connection between this world and his hitting his wife ...?

He felt mad, pins pricked him all over his body.

He couldn't stand there any more.

# *The Bungler's End*

Sitarama Rao felt that everything in the house was mocking him, laughing at him wildly. His wedding photograph hung on the wall. She sat on a chair and he stood by her side. He remembered that day very well. She felt very shy to sit down while he stood. Why did he make her sit while he himself stood? He was quite happy standing by her chair. Sitting on the chair, his wife looked uneasy. She sat like a villager with a third class ticket travelling in a first class compartment, like an orderly forced to sit by the side of a high official, like a goat standing on the back of a tiger in a circus.

In another photograph, she sat with a harmonium before her; low caste women squatting with bundles of hay in front of them came to his mind. How all these photographs had once attracted him! He could not understand how he had ever considered her as his all! In what state was he then? What were his tastes? He wanted to know about himself and began to read the diary he had kept. He was surprised. He felt as though he was reading a novel set somewhere else, far off. The character

in that was like a hero, no common man. It did not appear to him that it was he himself. He turned the pages, reading. He began –

## July 2

He and his wife sat on the beach and watched the sunset.

He asked his wife, "When did you first love me?"

She was too shy to say anything.

"Tell me, Indi, please. Won't you?" he asked, drawing her closer.

She bent her head and looked down.

"Look, this way. Tell me, please."

"I have always loved you," she said shyly, covering her face with her hands.

He was not satisfied with the reply.

"No, not like that. In the very beginning, the first time …" he asked.

"Let it be …" she said, smiling.

"Tell me. Why be too shy to tell me?"

At last she told him. One day, while she was going to Gurukul, she saw him carrying ten books in one hand, walking away swiftly. The moment she saw him, she fell in love with him.

"What shirt was I wearing then?"

"You were wearing a silk kurta with side-buttons."

He was pleased that she even remembered what he was wearing.

"What was on your mind then?"

She gave him a sly glance, with a mischievous smile.

"You thought, 'I wish he were my husband.' Wasn't it so? You thief!" he tickled her.

## July 3

In the evening, he and his wife sat in the flower garden under a flowering tree … Cool breeze. Her locks were ruffled by the breeze.

"Indi, what's it you love about me?" he asked.

She did not know what to say. She loved him from head to foot.

"Tell me."

"Your long sharp nose."

"He liked the reply."

"Is it so lovable?"

"Yes," she flapped her eyelids, arranged her hair.

He fondly drew her closer and kissed her, "Indi, my own Indi."

## July 4

They travelled in a boat on the Krishna and reached an island.

As long as they were there he felt they were at a lofty state, unapproachable to the rest of the world.

"We are fortunate," he said.

"I am," she stressed the 'I.'

"Am I not? There are none in this world who love like us, simple, sacred, pure and abundant," he said.

"Yes, sir," she sighed.

"Don't sir me. I am you, you are I."

"What do you want me to call you?"

"Call me by my name."

"Oh! Your name is much too long!"

"Call me Ramu."

She felt shy.

"Am I not calling you Indi?"

"..."

"Or, I'll call you Madam Indira Devi."

"Oh, no ... no," she begged him.

"You see!" She was cross.

"If you call me by name!"

She called him by his name; his heart was filled with joy.

"Again!"

"Ramu!"

"A little louder!"

She called out again. She grew bashful on hearing her own

voice and hid her head in his lap. Caressing her head, he was overjoyed. Whoever had experienced such joy!

Joy is bliss.

July 5

He said --

"Our life should go on like this forever."

She was afraid.

"Our bodies are different, but our souls are one."

She nodded – she was taught at the Gurukul that all souls were one.

"Therefore, there should be no secrets between us."

She was afraid – not knowing why he was talking so.

He guessed it and said, "Not that there are any now, there should never be. Not only the happenings, let us tell each other our feelings too, whatever the feelings – why leave room for any fear between us? We shall discuss everything with open hearts. Then our pure love will admit of no impediments."

She agreed ...

He could not read any more. Knives twisted in his heart. Who was that man? Was it he! Was that girl his present wife? That life, was it what they had really lived! That love, those ideas, had they been actually expressed by them? Those ideals, aspirations, had they been truly his own?

How he had changed! Since he had been changing every moment he was not aware of the terrible change come over him, but as he compared his present self with his self of those days, he was shocked. Had he such lofty ideals at one time? Was his heart so pure? Had he changed so much? Was he now sinking to the nether world?

He rushed to the mirror and looked at himself. His heart sank. A slight frightful cry escaped his throat.

He had really changed. With his feelings, his appearance too had changed. The eyes had become hollow. A white layer covered the black pupil. Furrows formed on the brow. Lines were visible near the lips. The lower lip became heavy, lost its grip and was loose. The lower jaw protruded. Suddenly, he was reminded of the buffalo's ruminative jaws. He grew miserable. He compared his photo of the wedding day and his present face in the mirror. "Which one of these two am I? Which? That gentleman? Or this devil? Which?"

No answer to this question. The gentleman looked on sadly, the devil terrified. He felt his body was growing in size, the house was too small, a cage of knives, his body could not be contained in it. He went out of the house. Where? Why? Why not? Why should he have to go somewhere? Going was necessary, the question where to, was not. He was going. As he walked, he felt that his friends were responsible for his present miserable state. They were also like him, unable to keep pace with the life around, lagging behind – suffering, weighed down

by their own sins! A small world each unto himself, an island!

He recalled each one of them. He was walking in the bazaar, he was also thinking. But to him, he was neither walking, nor thinking.

Chief among his friends, Surya Rao used to write at one time stories and essays. Some of them returned to him unpublished. This was due to the earth being round, he believed, argued and proved.

He no longer wrote. He was doing research on the well-known authors of the land, how they had won their fame by plagiarising foreign masters. If any book was praised, he could not tolerate it. He would at once name some English book of which it was a copy. If he had any difficulty in mentioning the book, he would say, "I have read it somewhere. This certainly is a copy. Can our authors write to well?" If he were to be asked, "Why don't you write well and show?" he would reply, "If one has to write, he should write a great book."

"All right, do it."

"That's not my job. If I say this chair is not good, it is mad to ask me to make a better one. That is not my occupation."

Presently, he was collecting material as to why our literature was daily deteriorating. On this subject he could talk for days on end, tirelessly tiring the listeners.

"Telugu style, Telugu life, Telugu nationalism, Teluguness should be vibrant in our writings. Then only can we create great literature ..." he would say.

"So what are we to do?"

Pat he would answer, "When we have the river Krishna, why write about the Yamuna? When we have Vemana, why write about Saint Tukarama? When we have several Telugu warriors, why write about Shivaji? When we have Kanaka Durga, why write about the glory of Kasi?" and then pause for applause.

After speaking for hours like this, he would conclude, "It is no use. Unless the foreign rule ends, we cannot create masterpieces." But one good thing about him was he praised dead authors. A writer's greatness depended on his being dead.

The second friend was Satvahana. Eccentricity in words and karappodi[1] on idli[2] were his favourites.

"I won't be happy, I won't let others be happy," he would say. He wrote a song about it –

*If love is the sky*
*joy is the sea*
*comet we come*
*ocean fires we burn.*
*If the world is a beautiful garden*
*life a lovely rose*
*thorny stalk we stay*
*sweet dreams we shatter.*

*In the pleasure house of life*
*if happiness be a bed of flowers*

---

1. a pungent powder made mainly of gram and red chillies, a delicacy that, with ghee goes as relish for idli connoisseurs.

2. a popular South Indian snack of rice and black gram cooked by steam.

*we become a cobra*
*dire toxic fumes we hiss.*

*In your pleasant sleep*
*in your quiet dreams*
*we come as nightmares*
*show you dreadful scenes.*

*In your dream journeys*
*in your golden bowls*
*we fill tear torrents.*

*We'll make your path slippery,*
*in your sweetened water we come as a twig,*
*in your cup of tea a dead fly,*
*We shatter your peace,*
*we shatter your peace.*[3]

Asked why this apparel, he replied in verse –

*Saffron robe toxic victual*
*not for you this apparel.*

Asked why do you wander like this, he replied –

*Wandering? You fool!*
*Assimilating in wandering*
*sure cure for the world.*

He hated children, recoiled at their sight. It might be that he saw in them his own naked reflection. Like him, they too

3. With apologies to my friend Bairagi. (Author's footnote).

liked odd things. What he put in verse after a great deal of thought, they uttered quite thoughtlessly. Asked why do you hate children, he replied –

*Toothless babies*
*eyeless blind birds*
*Mother Universe's droppings of coals …*
*Don't you mind if they pee?*

A strange thing about this eccentric man who said all those things, who was so indifferent to life was what he was a slave to hunger. When he was hungry, no friends, no verse, not even his anarchist theory. He would quarrel if there was no karappodi on idli, or no coconut chutney with rice. He behaved as if he would not, in the near future, have any more karappodi or coconut chutney. As though the waiter in the coffee house, or even his mother at home, had cheated him of a great opportunity to be happy.

Balakrishna was his father's son. For every little thing, he would say, "My father, you see …" There was not a thing which his father had not said. Whatever happened in this world, his father had already predicted, sitting right at home; and whatever he said would happen exactly in the same manner. Last summer itself he had said, summer this year would not be severe. Ten years ago, he had said that children born from now on would not have noses. Even before the war broke out, he had forecast that cholera would rage after the war. "You see! Everything is happening exactly as he has said," Balakrishna

would say. "My father, you see, his prescience is great!"

He was his father's slave. He spent his life gathering examples of his father's greatness and proving it to others. He would always say, "My father said ..." but never what he himself had to say. He never said anything. Even if he were to say something, it would turn out to be something his father had already said earlier. Many people would come to his father, to seek his counsel; they would follow his advice and become great. Such great men were there in all walks of life, but none of them showed any gratitude. Moreover, if his father were to meet them, they pretended they had never known him at all.

"What's the reason?"

"A trick to hide their own inferiority."

"All right. Instead of making others great all his life, why can't your father become great himself?"

"That is my father's greatness – he never bothers about himself!"

Listening to Balakrishna, Sitarama Rao would at times be irritated, at times, jealous. Irritated because Balakrishna would speak as if others' fathers were fools and his own was a real father. Jealous because Balakrishna had what he lacked – the courage to praise his father, though Sitarama Rao too had been devoted to his own father.

One day as Balakrishna was yapping, Sitarama Rao could not restrain himself any more and asked, "Is your father greater or mine?"

At this, Balakrishna was taken aback. He opened his mouth, sat gaping dumb-struck. But when he left, he told everyone he knew, "How funny! Sitarama Rao praises his own father!" Not merely telling them about it, he even proved to them and made them agree that it was bestial to praise one's own father and that no cultured man ever did so.

Siva Rao was another type. He would reel off names of all those who spoke well of him. And to give weight to their opinions, he would first prove their greatness and then tell what their precious opinions of him were.

One of them could not get along with anyone except Siva Rao for whom he would even lay down his life.

When Siva Rao was not seen for a couple of days, another great man took leave from his office and came in search of him.

Another friend would discuss with Siva Rao, family matters which should have been kept strictly secret. "I suspect my wife. What shall I do?" he would ask Siva Rao.

But then Siva Rao's boasts and slanders on women were delightful. They simply loved to hear them. He would speak as though all the women of the town simply could not resist his charms.

"Why, they don't even let me walk in the bazaar!" he would say. "However much I protest they simply shower money on me!"

Showing the ring on his finger, he would say, "Would I buy this? Oh, no. From the bazaar when I returned home yesterday evening, a lady appeared … No use my protesting. She slipped it on my finger. Oof, no sleep for me the whole of last night! …" And he would yawn.

Another moment, he would say sadly, "It's easy to hook women, but very difficult to shake them off."

All of them knew all that he said were lies, but they would get him to tell the same stories again and again and enjoy them. The woman herself does not have the attraction the scandal has. And nothing delights more than a scandal.

As he recalled his friends, Sitarama Rao felt revulsion. At one time, he had been glad that his friends too, like himself, did not care for the humdrum life, were free spirits, social rebels, and did not care for anyone. Now, they appeared to him heaps of verbiage. As the world was indifferent to them, they were attempting to attract it with their words. With words they were trying to cover up their incompetence. Unable to enjoy life, unable to plumb the depths of life, they were deceiving themselves with words. Words were their faith, words their commerce – words, words, unending words. Endless talk, ceaseless discussions – arguments – counter-arguments, anxiety to vanquish one another by words – this was their daily routine. Not just this, always criticising those who were doing something or the other, running them down. It was always easy to find fault with those who engaged themselves in one thing or

another, but not with those who did nothing. So they would consider themselves infinitely superior to those who made mistakes.

Recalling these things, Sitarama Rao suddenly stopped on the road, kicked hard with his foot and cried, "My friends are responsible for my ruin... my friends. For years I had no world but them. Because of them, I've changed. Because of them, I've become good-for-nothing."

This cry clashed with another thought in Sitarama Rao's mind.

"Why think I am ruined by them? Maybe they are ruined by me! Maybe I am responsible for their present state!

"Could it be that they have become good-for-nothing because of my company, because I am their whole world!

"In this mass of humanity why should they and I get together? What is the connection between us? Why did friendship grow between us?

"All of us must have had the same traits. We have become friends because we are alike.

"Then how could one be spoilt by the other? Spoilt we met; meeting we are spoilt."

When it was clear that their own weakness, pettiness, was responsible for all this, Sitarama Rao felt like stopping the gentleman coming ahead, on the pretext of borrowing a matchbox, tripping him and ripping his face. He wanted to go to jungles and make a living by highway robbing ... Oh!

How free life would be in the jungles! ...

At midnight, bullock-carts pass through. In them sit huddled men, women and children. Bells on the bullocks' necks keep tinkling. Sitting in the cart-troughs, drivers chant Anjaneya dandakam[4] at the top of their voices to drive their fear away –

*Sri Anjaneyam*
*Prasannanjaneyam*
*Prabhadivyakayam*
*Prasasthaprakasam ...*

(Sri Anjaneya, Gracious Anjaneya,
Divine Effulgence, Auspicious Radiance ...)

So they would recite full-throated. Despite their fear, women in the carts relate stories of robbers and devils. Devils are tricksters. They carry a palanquin on their shoulders and deceive the travellers by repeating egokam bygokam[5], like the boyis.[6]

Then the robber grove. A place notorious for robberies. A terror to the neighbouring villages. Those in the carts hold their breath. The bullocks prick their ears and nervously trudge forward. They don't look ahead, they watch the bushes and lumber along. In the carts widows sing –

*What does Rama say?*
*What does Bhadrachala Rama say? ...*

---

4. Dandakam is a string of names and attributes of a god for devotional recital; here it is devoted to Anjaneya, the First Devotee of Lord Rama.

5. Meaningless words repeated to relieve the fatigue of the palanquin-bearers.

6. Boyis are palanquin-bearers.

Waiting in the bushes for an opportunity, the robbers jump on the road and join –

*He says, 'Silly sluts!'*
*Hand your bags!*

The bullocks stand still. Men in the troughs are frozen with fear. Women and children cry "Bey!" But the robbers are not moved. Why should they? One by one, they rob everyone. If anyone opposes, they beat him up as they please, none can stop them. They need not fear that their self-respect will be threatened at any time. He is the king of the jungle, the wearer of the thorn-crown, the sound of the march-drum!

Walking on the road, Sitarama Rao laughed aloud. This thought gave him immense joy. It was nice to think of no social obligations, no rules, no customs, no laws. He proceeded further. After looting he wanted to do something else –

There is an attractive maiden in one of those carts. She is not like the rest of them. She is pure and gentle. But she too is frightened, shivering, weeping, standing at a distance, under a tree. He sees her, goes near her, scans her from head to foot. She is trembling. Looking at his manner, she fears her virtue is lost. She imagines things about the impending assault. She recalls the stories she had heard. Her body turns against them, readies for it; nerves ease, body yields. She begs him to save her.

"Keep quiet," he says. It is like thunder to her. Not knowing

what might happen when, and tenderly indifferent, she is most inviting.

He doesn't do anything; "Go away," he says; all his men disappear behind the trees. She, who has imagined things about rape, dreamt scenes of it, feels disappointed when nothing happens. She is in agony, her legs give way, she falls on the ground. After that, will that girl be able to forget him, ever? –

His imagination stopped at that. Where was he going? He looked around. Grandfather Ramayya's house was nearby. He wanted to go to his house. What would he be doing now, anyway?

As he entered the house, Grandfather Ramayya was playing with his grandson. The grandson was riding on the back of his grandfather, saying "Gullam, gullam, chal, chal!"[7]

The old man acting like a child, forgetting himself, his age, his feelings, playing like a boy; Sitarama Rao did not like it at all. He was disgusted that Grandfather Ramayya should be having such a peaceful time, especially when the whole world was in turmoil. At that time, Grandfather Ramayya seemed to him like a dwarf, a clay toy, a Maryada Ramanna.[8]

Noticing him, Grandfather Ramayya put down the child, and started a lecture, "You see, this life …"

Sitarama Rao lost his temper. This horse preaching him morals! Discoursing on life! This horse, not even a proper horse,

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7. Baby language; *lit.* Go, Go, Holse, Holse; On, On, Horse, Horse.

8. A legendary character, a wise do-gooder in the folklore.

counselling others too!

"Yes, I've seen. Haven't I? Feigns madness and kicks the arse," Sitarama Rao said.

Grandfather Ramayya was startled at these words. Sharply scanning Sitarama Rao, he said, "It kicks everyone. But, some don't learn, however hard it kicks."

Sitarama Rao felt, all of a sudden, that he was being taunted for striking his wife. How did this man come to know of it? Even if he knew, who was he anyway to taunt him? He wanted to insult him somehow. He asked, "Grandfather, isn't this your daughter's son?"

"Yes, babu."

"Please wipe your daughter's child's nose once, grandfather. Want to see. I want to see you do it and then die," said Sitarama Rao.

Grandfather Ramayya watched him closely and said, "Babu, it is not good for those who want to die to have wishes. One who entertains wishes is not fit to die. One who can treat life and death alike, he alone can do something. One who keeps on threatening to die, only to gain attention and sympathy cannot die, babu!"

"Then why are you living, Grandfather? – You have no wishes. – Is it to wipe your grandson's nose?" Sitarama Rao asked. Somehow he was getting angrier with Grandfather Ramayya. He wanted to pick up a quarrel on some pretext,

knock him down and kick him in the belly ... "Grandfather, Rama was a god, but then why did he have to commit so many errors? You say it was because he had to behave like a man as long as he was human? However intelligent a man, he should not show more intelligence than necessary under the circumstances. Adapting intellect to circumstances is the hallmark of a great man ... Isn't that what you told me the other day?"

Grandfather realised that Sitarama Rao was trying to pick up a quarrel. He merely nodded, unwilling to prolong the conversation.

"Then Grandfather, what is wrong in my hitting my wife? I know it was wrong of me to hit my wife. I know it was not her fault, but my mental perversion that made me do it. Still, I have done what men do. I have taken care, Grandfather, to see that my thinking, as you have said, has not exceeded the circumstances. Grandfather, isn't this the reason for Rama's making Sita climb on to her own pyre or deserting her in dense jungles? Grandfather, am I also not a divine incarnation?"

Grandfather Ramayya did not speak for a while. He seemed lost in some deep thought. Every second his expression was changing, eyes becoming red, the brows knitting. After a while, pinning Sitarama Rao with a piercing look, he asked, "have you beaten my grand-daughter?" His voice was no longer gentle, his look no longer sympathetic.

"Yes, Grandfather! I have walked in the footsteps of the

great. Sri Rama is my ideal ..." Sitarama Rao said with a smile. He knew that Grandfather was exasperated, and wanted to tease him more. He delighted at the prospect of upsetting the placid grandfather, making him angry and witnessing the common human frailties in him.

Grandfather's eyes were burning. He said, "Fool! You compare yourself to Lord Rama!"

To Sitarama Rao, Grandfather appeared like Narashimha the Terrible.[9] He realised he had been playing with fire. Grandfather was no more the grandfather he had known. All these days he had met with him, discussed many things, but never really understood him. He was frightened to see in Grandfather, someone he had never known or imagined.

"You have never tried to walk in the footsteps of great men. Instead, you see your own image in them, to justify your depravity, immorality, meanness. Dragging the great down to your own level, you please yourself. Rama's causing Sita suffering and your torturing your wife, are they the same? Fool! Why did Rama bid Sita enter the fire? Why did he send her to wild jungles? In pursuit of an ideal. Faced with the tragic dilemma of giving up his ideal or his wife, he preferred giving up his wife for an ideal, and thus became an ideal man. You! For what ideal have you been tormenting your wife? For the good of the world? You torture her for your animal desires, for

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9. An incarnation of Vishnu, half-man, half-lion form, who slew the demon Hiranyakasipu.

satisfying your lust, for hiding your incompetence!

"You are, without shame, still looking for reasons to cover up your depravity? There is hope for the repentant, not for those who seek reasons to justify their follies. Your education, intelligence is utilised to colour your misdeeds, to deceive people? Your end is near.

"This drama had started with your great-grandfather's grandfather and with you the last act has begun. In fact, the last scene is on. The curtain may fall any moment.

"I never thought that your family would end like this, would be so degraded. I know your entire family history. I knew your father, grandfather and the rest. All are the same. I used to hope for the birth of at least one sensible person in your family. Today, I have lost that hope too ..."

"Then you say that we are all fools, Grandfather?" Sitarama Rao asked.

"It is irrelevant now," said Grandfather Ramayya.

"All right, please tell me, you a wise man, what have you done? You have kept your father's property in tact and are living on its revenue, you say. Aren't you?Becoming your grandson's horse, wishing for reins, is your greatness? Grandfather Ramayya, I thought you were different, but you are like the rest of us!"

"Shut up!"

"I am the world. My mouth won't be shut. It will reverberate till eternity."

"Will you go away, or shall I have you thrown out?"

"That is what we think, but Grandfather, is there one to throw out, another to be thrown out? The one who throws out is himself thrown out. The one who is thrown out is throwing out the other. How do you like this philosophy, Grandfather? Good?"

"Have you gone mad?"

"What, Grandfather?"

"Are you mad?"

"What?"

"You are a mad man."

"I am a mad man?"

"Oh, yes, certainly."

"Who is a mad man?"

"You are."

"What is madness?"

"This is."

"Me … a mad man!"

"Oh, yes. I'll see to it that your wife makes a petition that you're insane. Nothing left now but to save your wife and children from you," said Grandfather Ramayya.

He, a mad man! He had thought of so many things, but not this. What did mad men do? Did they think like this? Did mad men deliberate if they were mad or not? What precisely was madness? Maybe mad men liked to say they were not mad.

"Grandfather, why do you talk madly?"

"Be gone! … Go out … Go away!"

"What! You are not mad! Only the mad are mad?"

He wanted to burn up Grandfather Ramayya with his looks, but his eyes were no longer steady. Grandfather Ramayya looked like Vinayaka,[10] passing a hand over his stomach after eating his bellyful of undrallu.[11]

He asked, "Where is the rat?" How many undrallu would be found in Vinayaka's belly, if it was split! When he was a boy he had been to the Kvari festival. What was tirumaliga[12] anyway? If Grandfather Ramayya's belly was cut into two with a knife …

Grandfather Ramayya was pushing him out.

"Just a minute, Grandfather …"

There was a knife in the hands of Grandfather's grandson. With a knife-on-board are cut cucumbers. With a knife are ripped bellies. He wanted the knife, he stretched his hand, but the knife was still out of reach.

"Grandfather! Grandfather Ramayya!"

What was Grandfather Ramayya saying? What was it? How did the knife in his grandson's hands get into his hands? Would he stab or what?

"You madcap!" Grandfather Ramayya said.

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10. God with the face of an elephant; son of Siva and Parvati; he is fond of undrallu (see next note) and his mount is the rat.

11. Ceremonial snack-balls made of rice and gram and cooked by steam.

12. Vaishnava term for house.

Sitarama Rao swung around and ran out.

Grandfather Ramayya heaved a deep sigh and sat thinking. The grandson said, "Kallem leni gullam."[13]

Sitarama Rao strayed into the bazaar. He knew he had strayed into the bazaar, he knew he had no particular place to go to; he knew he had to take to the bazaar.

His legs were carrying him away, as if they had nothing to do with him. "Thinking is the brain in the head, walking are the legs. Why should the legs obey the brain?" he reasoned. His limbs acquired full freedom; to each its whim, one had no control over the other. The brain was thinking in its own way, the hands were swinging their way, the eyes were seeing on their own. He was glad that he was not bothered any more to think for every little thing, the limbs went on with their jobs, no longer waiting for his orders, as if they had nothing to do with him. Outwardly, there was no difference except that he was walking faster than before.

"Where to?" asked an acquaintance.

"Ask my legs. What do I know?" he said, walking on, without stopping. He tried to stop, but his legs did not obey him. He looked like a man carried off by the speeding current despite his efforts to reach the shore.

"You are not to be seen!" enquired someone.

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13. Baby language, "holse without leins," horse without reins.

"No breaks. What can I do?" he replied. Like a bicycle on a downward gradient, he sped on. Without stopping he told another he came across, "I'm going."

On the roadside children were playing billangodu.[14] One of the boys cried, Munnanchi.[15] Walking along the road, Sitarama Rao shouted, Ennanchi?[15]

He stepped on something, suddenly stopped and looked closely. A piece of black coal! The destitute black coal became his plaything. He kicked it here and there. It went wherever he kicked. He laughed at its innocence. Picking it in his hand, throwing it up high in the air, catching it coming down, he kept walking. However high he threw it up, it returned and fell near him.

"Shameless. A wife is better than this!" he thought. But pity overtook him. "Are you hurt? My dear!" he caressed and kissed it. When he kissed it with his lips, his hands were left with black stain. Then all the walls in the town appeared white to him. With the black coal he started drawing figures on the walls. Wherever he drew, he drew the figure appearing on the next page, with slight variations. Children gathered around him. They were after him, each asking for his picture to be drawn.

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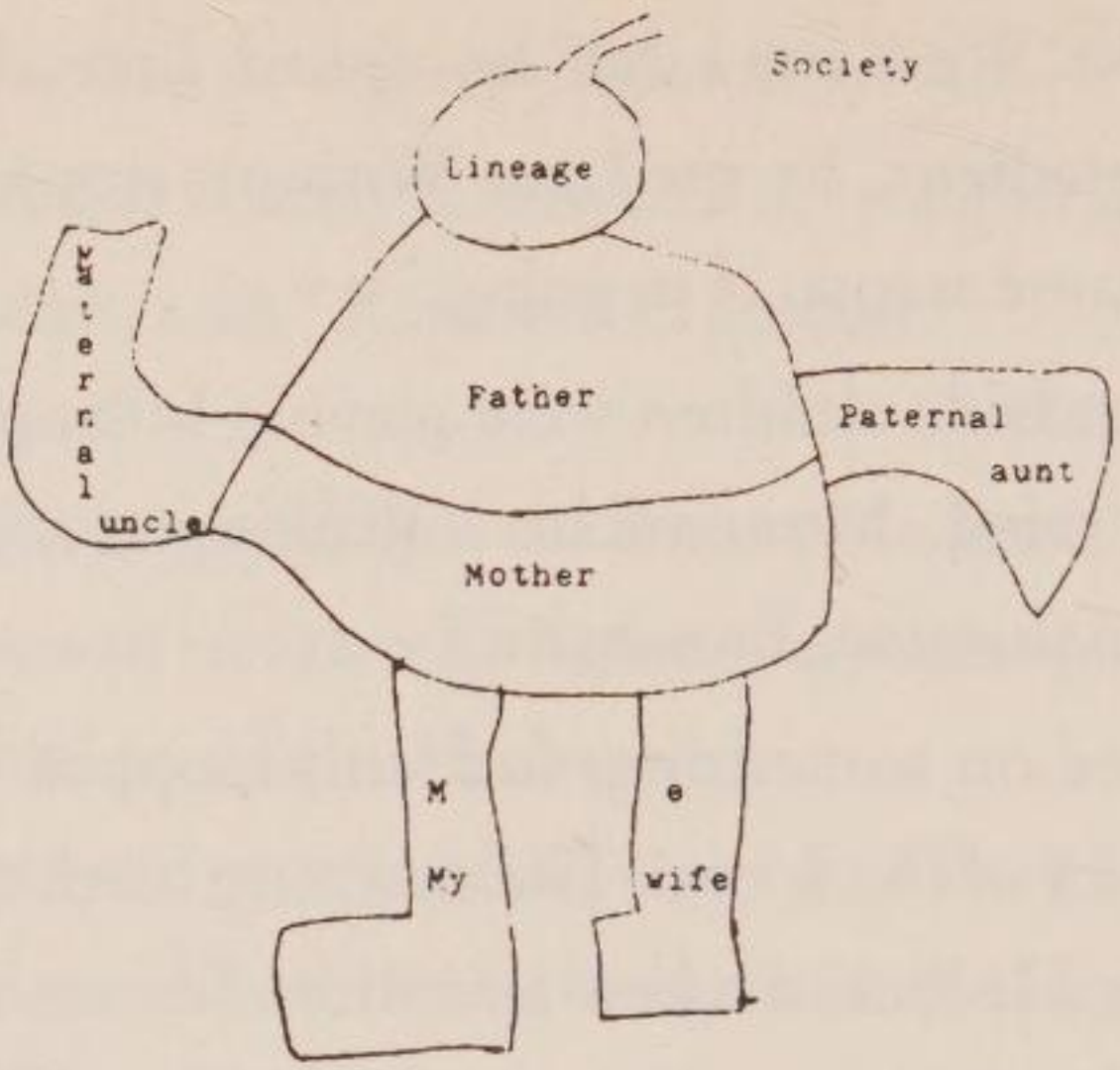
14. An outdoor game played by children with two sticks, one long, another short.

15. Terms used in the game.




"I won't."

"Why not?"

"I won't draw children's pictures. Each one of you go where your nose points. There will be Grandfather Ramayya. He has a brush-like tail. Ask that tail. It will draw ... Hoom ... go away!" he drove them away.

He saw a gentleman passing, with a black coat, zari[16] headgear, swinging a walking stick, walking in dignity.

"Hey there! Stop!" he hailed.

The gentleman stopped, taken aback.

Sitarama Rao went near him, put a hand on his shoulders, and asked, "It's all right. But do you know why you're born?"

The gentleman stared at him in confusion.

"All right, let it go if you don't know. But do you know

16. Lace, gold or silver.

how you're born?"

The gentleman was alarmed.

"Then, why all this pomp and show? ..." Sitarama Rao started laughing loudly.

The gentleman tried to free himself and go.

"You've covered yourself with so many clothes, like an overdecked bull, like a washerman's donkey! Why did you beat your wife the other day when she asked for a sari? Your wife is like my younger sister, that's why I am asking. How could you hit a woman?"

The gentleman freed himself and hastily walked away, looking back again and again.

Sitarama Rao went into a nearby coffee hotel, had some tiffin, came to the proprietor and asked, "How much?"

"Five annas."

"What if I give only four annnas?"

The fat proprietor was startled, and stared.

"Will the sun rise in the west? Will the state of our finances be upset? Will women get equal rights? Won't we attain independence, ever? What do you think will happen?" he asked.

The proprietor panicked. A regular customer of the restaurant, a lawyer, could not tolerate this affront to the proprietor, paused in his coffee and said, "Pay up quietly."

Sitarama Rao looked at the lawyer with pity and said, "Hey! You talk of justice, but what you do, is it just? You take coffee

so many times, but have you ever taken a couple of idlis for your wife? Poor things, aren't they human? Don't we have to treat them as our equals? Don't we? … Speak, my dear, speak up!" He cajoled him. With tears in his eyes, he proceeded, "She has left her parents, deemed you her god, never allowed other men to come near her, been coping with you all these days … Should you treat her like this? Speak, my dear, speak up!" He held the lawyer's chin and pleaded. Before the people around knew what was happening, he came out of the restaurant and stood on the traffic police post. Then he felt like giving a speech in English, instead he sang in Telugu –

*Hari! Hari!*[17] *A good woman,*
*know her on this earth!*
*Finds the path-showing guru*
*reaches the goal, the woman*
*Worships the parents-in-law*
*praises them, the woman.*
*Aged parents-in-law*
*disobeys, the ass.*
*Steady, doesn't cross*
*the husband, the woman.*
*Unafraid, orders about*
*the man, the ass.*
*Ever looking for good*
*company is the woman.*

17. One of the names of Vishnu; also used as an interjection.

*Husband not home.*
*Roams about, the ass.*
*Lust, anger, greed, desire*
*conquers, the woman.*
*Lustily plays with*
*lovers, the ass.*
*Life to sanctify*
*dedicates herself, the woman.*
*Bliss fails to attain*
*can't forget the body, the ass.*
*Practitioner of virtue*
*on earth is the woman.*
*In gladness composed this*
*Yedla Ramadasa, Oh! Ass!*

By the time the song was over a crowd had gathered. Looking at them, Sitarama Rao thought that they wanted to listen to his speech. After considering whether to give a performance of harikatha[18] or burrakatha,[19] he began a speech –

Hey! You there! Listen to me. Some people say I am mad. Don't believe it. Can we call all those we cannot understand mad?

Hey! You think you are doing something or want to do something in this world. But what's there to do in this world?

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18. A mythological tale in prose and verse, recited by a single performer to the accompaniment of cymbals, violin and mridangam (two-side drum).

19. A ballad, interspersed with prose and action, sung by three performers, to the accompaniment of a single stringed instrument and a drum.

There is nothing. Believe me, O fathers!

They know what we like to hear, and then they tell us about it, exhort us to do it, and then make us do it. Hey! That's all. Nothing more to it. It is all a fraud, fathers!

You see, first they told us that God gave us birth and we should try to unite with Him. We believed. Believing, we tried. Hey! You know what they did then? They said, "God is not without, He is within the man. So service to man is service to God. All of you serve man." Hey! This too we believed. And believing, we began to serve man. We abused all those who believed in God. We showered on them the choicest abuses. We thought we knew the truth and they did not. When we did thus, then, you see, what happened! They said, "You think all men are equal. No, there are several classes in society. Society makes progress through conflict between these classes. Support the lowest class and carry on the struggle with the rest." We believed in this too. And believing, we carried on the struggle. With one stroke, the God in man disappeared. Struggle, struggle, struggle, struggle between ourselves, fight between ourselves. One suspects another, each hates the other, one opposes another. Arere, what a disaster! My dear fathers! This is no world, this is a butcher's shop!

And with this, social service disappeared. They say, society evolves in a particular way. We have to hail it! What else! My dear fathers! Our job is to clear the stones and pebbles for the flow of time!

Some have discovered this. And discovering it, they say "Man's goal is to garner knowledge." They ask us to rely on rationalism. They ask us to question ourselves, "Why?" "Why?" "Why?" To our whys they answer us according to their knowledge. And we believe according to our knowledge.

But there is no ultimate answer to any 'why.'

Why knowledge?

Hey! There is no answer, but they say, "For joy."

Why joy?

There is no answer, my dear fathers! At some place or the other this 'why' has to cease, my dear fathers!

Hey! You know why this non-existent "why" was created? They think that unless we are given some reason or other as to why, we won't work. Hey! That's all. Nothing more to it, my dear fathers!

Hey! Fathers! All these are lies. They tell us lies, deceive us, and then make us work for them. If there is nothing, won't we work? And when there is nothing, what if we don't work? If there is really something, is there any scope for the goal to keep changing like this? Moreover, it is said the goal always changes! Look at their audacity! How cleverly they tell us there is no goal at all!

Hey! Our birth is a fact. Our death is a certainty. Life in between is true. Birth and death are not in our hands. Then, only one thing remains – life. We need only food to live. Why

all this fuss about food? Can't we come to some understanding among ourselves? They delude us saying there is something more in this world, and make us fight to death among ourselves. Nothing else, my dear fathers! We have only to live here for a few days. Everyone has to. For this, why all this strife, bloodshed? Who can carry anything beyond death? Hey! Live on, fathers! Live on, till death!"

He finished his speech ...

"Move off," a policeman said.

"Where?" Sitarama Rao asked.

"Begone."

"I'll be gone – but I'll be back."

Quickly, he descended from the traffic police post and started wandering again. He went to the red-light district.

It seemed strange to him that prostitutes should build a separate district for themselves. Perhaps, all those in one profession wanted to reside in one place, like he himself who had no profession at all and his friends. Somehow, he felt an affinity with the prostitutes. Both of them had been useless to the society, built mansions on its filth and lived in them. Nobody pitied them: they were objects of derision.

A prostitute was talking to a client at her doorstep.

Sitarama Rao wanted to listen to their talk. Quickly, he walked up to them, and asked the woman, "What are you talking with him?"

The woman and her client stood staring at each other.

"Tell me. I too want to hear!" he said.

"It is none of your concern," said the woman.

"None of my concern! In the society what two persons talk, what goes on between them is everybody's concern. It is everyone's business to know it. What do you think society is? It is the field hedge; the manche[20] is the watchman who keeps an eye on everyone in the field. It makes happy those who follow its commands and punishes those who disobey. Don't you know?" he asked.

The client panicked and went away.

Sitarama Rao was sorry. He said, "Everyone is like that. No one helps you in need. You have become cheap because you take money."

"How else can I feed myself?"

As he looked at her, love and pity welled up in him. He was reminded of the sewer in front of his house, which collected the filth of the town, and flowed on quietly, like a pregnant woman. He saluted her from within.

She invited him in.

She seated him, brought the betel leaves, sat by his side, and prepared the pan. When he declined, she said, "I'll feed you!" and then put the rolls in his mouth one by one.

"I am not after money," she said.

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20. A raised platform from where the watchman keeps an eye on the fields; a machan.

"What a pity!"

"In fact, I am not a courtesan at all."

"Are you a mighty virtuous wife or what?" he was about to rise, to spit out the betel juice.

"You may think it funny. But I am really not a courtesan. You may think I am boasting, but in fact I am a Brahmin girl."

He was listening to her open-mouthed. His mouth, red with betel juice, was like the open mouth of a crow, a lilac.

"My mother was jilted by a Brahmin boy. I was born before their marriage. Then my mother sold me to dancing girls. You don't know how I fought against my entering this profession!" She was trying to shed tears.

"Why? What is so tough about this profession?"

"How could you! Even you say so! We are looked down upon by everyone," she said sadly.

"You want to become a wife?"

"I always dream of it. I want to marry someone and lead an honourable life. This is a very low profession, not at all suitable for my quality.

"Why? Isn't your quality good?"

"How could you!"

"Then you want to become a wife and bear children?"

Pretending to be shy, playing with the zari border of her sari, she said, "Fallen though, aren't we women? What woman doesn't have that desire? You may think so, but we are also like

the rest of them …"

Sitarama Rao started at this … we are also like the rest of them … Beneath the veneer, all of them the same? Perhaps that was why all of them acted alike when stirred. Hungry or angry, distressed or in love they all acted alike. Differences were only in the outer coating. When the coating melted away, the stuff was the same.

Thoughts raged in his mind. He looked at her pointedly. The thoughts were arrested. To his eyes she seemed to be Surya Rao one moment, Satavahana another, Balakrishna another moment, Siva Rao yet another, yet another moment he himself.

Around her head were moving in circles the heads of his friends and his own head. Her head, which was in the centre, was bursting with laughter for a while, and then weeping copiously.

Surya Rao's head said –

"We are Andhras! We are the five locks of hair of the Andhras. The Andhra style, the Andhra refinement, the Andhra valour, the Andhra learning, the Andhra treasury – they are personified in us.

"She is Mother Andhra! Yes, Mother Andhra herself! All our traits have crystallized in her. Come, let us worship Mother Andhra, bring flowers. Mother Andhra, to you our salutations!"

Satavahana's head – "We are sewers. This is an ocean. All the sewers in the Andhra have to fall into this ocean some time or other! Therefore this is a sacred place for the Andhras! Let us

sport in this ocean of filth. The great people of Andhra! Lovers of Andhraness! Come, welcome, take this holy water!"

Balakrishna's head – "O Great People! … You know my father … He, my father, has already said …"

The other heads – "Shut up. Don't utter your father's name in this holy place."

Balakrishna's head – "Listen to me. Or else I'll quit your company. I'll myself become Mother Andhra!"

The other heads were bullied and fell silent.

Balakrishna's head – "You see, he, my father, has already said… yes, he said it, that in this Dark Age, an ocean of filth itself would become the Mother Andhra. And it has happened as he has said it. She is the Mother Andhra. This our Mother has taken in her lap all the filth of Andhra. So Mother Andhra has swelled. This place has been specially earmarked by our ancestors to save the society from filth. Just as Siva saved the world by keeping the poison in His throat, she, our Mother, has kept in her lap the filth and saved Andhra. My thanks to her!"

Siva Rao's head – "You may doubt our calling her Mother. Don't have any doubts. Whether it is mother or father, daughter, wife, sister or friend, we love them for sex! What gives you power to love anything is sex. Sex is the reason for love of fellow-beings, society, country! You should not hide such a sacred urge. You should not hesitate to fulfil it."

At this, Sitarama Rao shouted, "O God!" and shot out of the house. He hit the road and walked without a pause, straight where his nose pointed.

A drunken enadi man was coming, singing and staggering. His wife was supporting him, holding his hand firmly, and leading him. From time to time he shook his hand free, shouting, "Let me alone, you slut!"

"Are you drunk?" asked Sitarama Rao.

"Answer him … the lord is asking something …" he told his wife.

Still supporting him by the hand, she said, "What's it to you if he is drunk?"

Sitarama Rao wanted to kick the society. But how? Where was its head? Or tail? Or belly? Where should he kick it?

He walked on till the end of the road and turned. There was a temple. A meeting was taking place in front of it. There was a big crowd. As he saw it, he felt that the society he had been searching for all along, the society that had been eluding him was here. He went quickly into the middle of the crowd.

On the platform were seated Parabrahma Sastri, Nagalingam, Rambhotlu, Visvesvara Rao, Surya Prakasa Rao and Chaitanya Swami. Their necks carried loads of garlands. People were looking at them without batting an eyelid, rapt as if they were they very images of gods.

One by one they rose and gave speeches. They said poverty

must go; that ignorance should be destroyed, and that tears should be shed at the plight of the people.

The crowd was in raptures, they were punctuating the speeches with applause and jai-jais.[21]

Sitarama Rao was surprised. The garlands around their necks, the manner in which they sat on the chairs, the people's joy, their applause – they agitated him, disgusted him.

Such people to preach others! The crimes, deceptions, iniquities they perpetrated – how could people forget them so soon!

Without mending their own ways, weren't they ashamed of delivering sermons to people?

He raged within, heaved torrid sighs; something within was struggling to burst out.

Nagalingam completed his speech and sat down. Thunderous applause and jaijais. The President rose and humbly said, "If anyone wants to speak, he is welcome."

From the middle of the crowd Sitarama Rao shouted, "I'll speak!" The crowd was hushed. All turned their gaze on him.

The President said, "Please come over here."

Shoving the cowed, Sitarama Rao reached the platform. He was known to all on the stage. Surya Prakasa Rao was a close relative of his.

Sitarama Rao's appearance was dreadful. He was staggering.

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21. Hail! hail! – an interjection.

Those on the stage grew worried, and were whispering among themselves.

Looking at the crowd sharply, he shouted, "These are the ones to preach you morals? To listen to them you are all so eager? These are the ones you honour? Is there a single one among them who leads an honourable life? They are all wicked, immoral – traitors, cheats!"

The crowd was dumbfounded. Leaders on the platform looked at each other in obvious consternation.

"Who among these is fit to preach to you? This Parabrahma Sastri? A little while ago he gave an excellent speech on virtue. You all applauded. But what is it he does? Ask him why his sister-in-law is not yet married! Ask him why she is always in his house! Don't you know this Nagalingam? Ask him why he keeps a Malayalee boy as a typist! Aren't other boys who are not fair, slender and soft, good enough to be typists? When there is no one around, why does he sit caressing the typist's hair? Ask him how well he likes the handicraft industry! And this Rambhotlu strangled his own grandmother and stole her sixty thousand. And this Visvesvara Rao, he is an old man, but has he any sense? What did he do the other day when he lured a ten year old girl into his house, promising her sweets? You all talked about it for a whole month! You had even resolved to ostracise him! Have you forgotten it so soon? Don't you know this Surya Prakasa Rao? He pocketed ten thousand from the charity home funds, and lent the money on interest to his

neighbour Papayya, mortgaged his house, and seduced his wife. Papayya knows it, but what can he do? If he says even a single word, he is threatened with the auctioning of his house! Now Papayya has gone mad. These are the speakers to preach you morals! Embodiments of sacrifice delivering sermons for social welfare! Foremost of leaders for the upliftment of the people!"

As he spoke, the crowd listened to him open-mouthed. Leaders on the platform were visibly shrinking. None of them dared to confront him. Each one of them sat rigid, afraid what more of his dark secrets would be made public.

Surya Prakasa Rao said to the President, "He is drunk. Get him off the stage. Why tolerate this nonsense?" But the President was feeling suffocated. Sitarama Rao was going on with his speech. Someone from the crowd shouted, "Tell us something about yourself too."

"Whatever my affairs, I am not preaching to you. Teaching you to do something I myself do not do," said Sitarama Rao.

"Then, what've you been doing all this while?" shouted another.

"I am asking you not to be deceived by those who preach you morals. I am telling you of their cunning conduct and vile nature."

"Oh! Shut up and get off!" The crowd became restive, and started whistling, giggling and clapping.

A soda bottle screeched.

The President picked up courage, pulled down Sitarama Rao by the shoulder, and said, "Sit down."

Sitarama Rao shook himself free and shouted, "I'll tell you something about this President. "Isn't he a swami? Personification of purity! Renouncer of worldly pleasures! Know his exploits!" Chaitanya Swami became pale, and slumped into his chair.

"Come, tell, you must tell us!" shouted the crowd.

"The Swami says the world is an illusion. Preaches us to make effort all through life to reach God. But, ask him what he does! He says he doesn't have to practise his own teachings and precepts; he says they are devised for the ignorant. The wise are beyond them. Since he is wise, there is nothing wrong in what he does, and even if there is, it won't touch him.

"He brought with him the wife of a young man, to instruct her in vedanta. Let him deny it! When the young woman initially did not agree, he taught her: 'There is nothing wrong in it. If there is an itch, don't we scratch?'

"The young woman practised his teaching. And when she did not stop with the Swami, Swamiji got wild and expelled her from his ashram. The young woman wandered and wandered and ultimately killed herself. Ask him if it is a lie!"

The crowd was enjoying this, roaring with approval. Chaitanya Swami was fuming and hissing. Sitarama Rao spoke on.

"Now I'll tell you about yourselves. The whole fault is yours. Whoever speaks what, whatever is spoken by whosoever, you listen with foolish faces. You have no sense. You are sheep. You don't think at all who is speaking what. You say haa haa haa hee hee hee ..."

He was pleased with his own mimicry. Many in the crowd too laughed, but some were not amused. "He is mad," some said. "Arrogance must be cured," said others. The gentlemen on the platform began breathing a bit at the respite from the hammering they had been receiving. Surya Prakasa Rao was furiously thinking of a way out.

"Don't believe there is no link between the private and the public lives of social reformers. The distinction is meant merely to hoodwink you. You must watch the private lives of the leaders carefully, appraise them. Don't forget a man's feelings, desires and opinions are determined by his private life ... You are all ignorant, fools, cowards ..." He went on abusing the crowd.

Surya Prakasa Rao, who was waiting for a chance, sprang up, pushed aside Sitarama Rao and addressed the crowd: "He is a drunkard ... a murderer. How can you tolerate his vile abuse? Aren't you the sons of Mother Andhra? What has happened to your Andhra blood, Andhra courage, Andhra power? How can you put up with this insult?"

"Kick him" "Stab him" the crowd was surging to the stage, abusing Sitarama Rao.

Sitarama Rao jumped on the table, lifted a chair, and shouted, "Come ... Touch me and you lose your life ... Let him come first, the one who has given up hope of life."

His appearance was terrifying. His face showed he would not stop at anything. The crowd was afraid to advance. Everyone thought he himself was being targeted, scared the first blow would fall on him. Heaping obscenities on those in the front, those in the rear were pushing them toward the stage. But those in the front stood their ground, did not budge.

He was still holding the chair high shouting, "Don't come ... One step and heads will break." As people were terrified, his spite increased. "You are all cowards. Why don't you come forward? You are still standing there. Come on ..."

"Beat him up. Why don't you? He is a wicked man ... He has just beaten his wife and children and come here ... If you just stand staring he will do anything," someone shouted from the crowd. The voice sounded familiar to Sitarama Rao. He looked in that direction. Grandfather Ramayya was coming to the front, jostling the crowd. The crowd followed him ...

"Grandfather Ramayya! It's you! Come on ... You're the only one left ... You see, this Grandfather Ramayya! He is an old man, but ..."

"Pull him down ... Seize him ..." shouted Grandfather Ramayya. Chaitanya Swami picked up courage and toppled the table on which Sitarama Rao was standing. Sitarama Rao fell down, the crowd pounced on him.

"Kick him."

"Tie him up."

"Oh! What he has let loose!"

"Abuse leaders in public!"

"He is not mad. They have private quarrels. He has done all this out of spite, to tarnish their name."

All of them reviled him, everyone kicked him.

Sitarama Rao had no strength to move his limbs, he lay still.

Grandfather Ramayya came near him, and enquired, "Babu ... how do you feel now?"

"I am all right, Grandfather. Won't you do your grandson a favour?"

"What's it, babu?"

"Ask your grand-daughter to forgive me, Grandfather ..."

"She must have forgiven you long ago, babu!"

"Grandfather ... I still don't know what my fault is ... What sin have I committed which others haven't, Grandfather? I don't know anything ..."

"I want to talk to you, babu."

"No, Grandfather, no ... I am sick of all talk ..."

"It is all right, babu. Let's go near that rain tree. We can talk at leisure."

It is a rain tree; it sleeps at night; and so it is called nidraganneru.

Nearby, is a bridge; opposite the bridge, a school; a little farther is an ashram.

Grandfather Ramayya and Sitarama Rao rested under the rain tree. Sitarama Rao was looking at the bridge and the carts and men going over it. An officer in a suit stomped his way. Clad in a dhoti, sandal mark on forehead, a Brahmin priest crossed the bridge, muttering some mantras. A cloutpiece on his crotch, an erikala man was herding pigs across the bridge, urging the beasts 'turtur'. A car sped, a jutka trotted, a two-bullock-cart lumbered along.

Watching the scene, Sitarama Rao felt he understood the nature of the world, what he had been searching for all these days. He thought the world progressed from animalism to spiritualism, from spiritualism to materialism. It is true, there are men who belong to each of these three stages in this world. One doctrine does not demolish another. Though they belong to different periods, motorcars, horse carriages and bullock carts are still very much together. All of them continue to be needed, they continue to do their jobs. The arrival of one has not rendered the other unnecessary, nor destroyed it. Whatever the stages it has passed through, whatever its evolution, mankind has, at any one time, the marks of all the stages it has passed through, and moves forward assimilating all of them. But, then, what is the meaning of moving from one stage to another? – To this question he did not have an answer at once. It seemed he was developing a new vision. But he did not

want to think any more. He sat there looking at Grandfather Ramayya.

Minutes passed. Looking closely at him, Grandfather Ramayya started speaking slowly –

Knowledge is, of course, necessary, babu! There can be no progress without knowledge. As man is a part of nature, he would be a slave to it, if there were no knowledge. It is knowledge that separates man from nature. With this knowledge, man is able to see nature distinctively, is able to understand it, to conquer it. He becomes a maker of his future. But knowledge is double-edged. As long as we regularly replenish the treasury of knowledge, it helps in man's progress. If it is not constantly worshipped with offerings, it turns against and destroys the very mankind which has created it.

This is the cause of your downfall. You have knowledge. You have understood the doctrine which came into vogue recently. But, circumstances have now changed. After that doctrine came into vogue, many new things have come to light. And your knowledge has not been able to help you resolve the new problems. If you had in you a genuine humanity and appropriate culture, you know what you would have done? You would have filled your treasury of knowledge with new acquisitions. With your knowledge, you would have, under the pressure of problems, looked for a new path, forged ahead and worked for the good of the community.

But you did not do so. Instead, with the help of your

knowledge you have concluded that the present-day problems cannot be resolved, showed how the age-old doctrines were defective, and decided "There is nothing we can do in this world."

You may think as you please. But this is no new discovery which you have so grandly proclaimed. Babu, it is precisely because we have known our old theories, one by one, to be incomplete, that we have always been striving for a new one and new knowledge. Then is it any wonder or any achievement on your part that you have been able to prove our old theories wrong? Likewise, it is no wonder we know that our knowledge is incomplete. And it is good to be aware of it. But then, this should spur us to discover new ways, find new things. On the contrary, a man who uses this knowledge to ruin himself is no man; he is a savage, a monster.

Babu, I know what troubles your mind. You want to ask, "Grandfather, you agree I have knowledge. Then instead of progressing why have I regressed?" All right, babu I'll tell you the reason for this also.

Knowledge alone does not help a man to progress. He should have the mind to use it for the common good. There is the sword. In the hands of a noble man with the right outlook it will be used for the common good. Otherwise it will be used for total destruction. And power, power is also like that. Knowledge too is like that!

You are in this tragic predicament. And you are struggling,

not able to find a way out. You have acquired some knowledge. But you haven't experienced the depths of life. Content to stand on the shore of the river of life with your bookish knowledge, you have not developed the proper mental attitude. Acquisition of knowledge by itself has not been able to give you joy or satisfaction. And apart from your own joy, you needed something else to underpin this knowledge. You have looked and looked for it, searched day and night, but you haven't found the requisite foundation. What served as props for lesser men were no good for you, gave you no hold, and you lost grip. Your life itself lost its anchor. Your downfall began. You went on till you hit the bottom.

Did you stop even at that stage? No. Even a nihilist like you needed causes to justify your ruin. You have imagined them. All that had happened was wrong! You looked ahead, and concluded there is nothing to wish for in the future.

It is precisely because such terrible conflict, ruin and horror result from a lack of proper perspective for knowledge that we take society step by step. Evolution does not leap like a frog.

With his knowledge, man can look ahead. The good in the present society, and the good that removes the bad in the present society, combine to make the future society. Therefore we can look ahead and guess what may happen in the future. These guesses may not come true. We do not as yet have full power over natural forces, social forces and individual forces. Based on our experience and knowledge, we set an ideal for

ourselves and work for it. We come across many unforeseen obstacles in this attempt. We'll come to know of things we haven't known before and replenish the treasury of our knowledge. Because of this constant change, our ideal too changes, however slightly. Therefore, it is futile to look too far ahead, to resolve it shall be so, and then determine the course of our lives.

To think as you do is nothing unique. Many can think so, have thought so, are doing so. I have my own views of social evolution. But I have no wish to impose them on the society. You know why, babu.

When the human mind is not ripe, even the best seed will raise a bad crop. Treatment is prescribed as appropriate to the complaint. Therefore, it will not only be untrue to tell man what the society will be like after several stages of evolution, but it will also confound his mind, make him incapable of concentrating on the present problems. So, we talk of only the next stage, how it will come. You need not worry that what we are telling is untrue. It is true at that time. Knowing by experience that knowledge is incomplete, we are merely adding to it. That's all, babu ... that's all ... There is nothing more ... Looking, back, calling it all deceit and giving it a perverse interpretation merely speaks of your own mind ... That's all, babu, that's all.

Grandfather Ramayya stopped, he looked at Sitarama Rao with concern. Sitarama Rao was still looking at the bridge.

People were crossing it, to and fro. Without turning his gaze, he asked, "Why? What for all this toil?"

"I'll tell you, babu, I'll," said Grandfather Ramayya. He proceeded –

What? Why? Unless we know how and why these questions were born, we won't get the right answers, babu. So, I'll begin at the beginning.

These questions were born when men first began to think. They helped in understanding nature's ways.

As you have said so many times, life was born with no specific purpose. It was not born to achieve anything in particular. Nature is also like that. Nature is there. It has its laws and follows them. That's all. It has no goal. It has not evolved to attain any perfection. As part of this nature, man had to live. Living things that could not stand nature's ways became extinct. Others survived and grew. Not that they consciously did so in order to survive, but they simply survived, as long as they could, without any thought.

Knowledge came into this living milieu. "Why is it happening like this? Why is it happening like that?" Such questions arose. These questions helped in understanding nature. When they began to understand nature's ways, it became imperative that their own ways had to change. Hitherto, they had done what they pleased, but now they had to do only certain things. Again the question why. To escape nature, to understand it, to have it suit their convenience, a

goal became necessary.

Do you know how this goal was determined, babu? I'll tell you.

Men got together at one place and began to live systematically. This system determined man's future. Maybe if man had originally adopted another system, evolution might have been different! But it had not happened like that. When the system in practice began to trouble many, man thought of how to overcome those troubles, imagined a society where those troubles wouldn't be, and began to work for it. Thus, a goal became necessary for man's progress.

We describe man's evolution in stages for the sake of convenience, but, in fact, they are not watertight compartments. On the basis of knowledge gained in trying to achieve a goal, our goal was constantly changing and evolving. This evolution is like a flow. And it may have faced many obstacles like mountains and hills. It may have had to make a great effort to overcome them. Sometimes it may have flowed slowly, sometimes swiftly. But it is an endless flow.

See, babu! While seeking relief from his ephemeral troubles, man contributes to this evolution. So he strengthens the forces that help this evolution and puts down the forces that don't and ends them. He has been striving for this all along. It may be agonising now. But it is not necessary that it will be so always. As man progresses, acts for the good of society may give him joy and contentment; then man will do only such

things, nothing else. Then there is no place for the question why. This why was born to help man do good. When doing good itself becomes man's way of life, the necessity of this why diminishes, it may not even be there eventually.

Babu! Just think of this. Now, a person like you or me wont steal, wont commit adultery, wont tell lies. Why? Is it because the society will punish? No. It is true, of course, at one time the society threatened man and prevented him from doing these things. But now it has become part of our nature. We don't do those things. Why? Because of the culture we have inherited. They don't make us happy any more. They distress us.

I agree we cannot change some traits or yearnings of men. But I do not agree that those cravings should be fulfilled in the same manner as they had been from the very beginning. By sublimating desires we derive another kind of satisfaction. We can turn the lust for woman into the love of country, the love of all humanity. It is because man has the capacity to make things sublime that he is able to derive pleasure in helping society evolve. And sooner or later it will become his nature.

Then, man will conquer nature. There wont be any conflict between man and nature. There wont be any conflict between opposing forces in man.

Babu! You think man is a slave to circumstances. That is why, you used to say again and again, "What have I to do with it? I had no other go but to do it. Circumstances give me

feelings, and feelings make me do things. Then, what am I?" It is not like that, babu. It was like that once. Man is gradually freeing himself from nature's chains. Knowing the laws of nature, using them for his own progress, mastering nature, man is asserting his own freedom.

When man fully understands the forces of nature, there wont be any conflict between man and nature. When the evolution of society itself gives joy to man, there wont be any conflict between man and society. There wont be conflict between opposing forces in man. Man will become a complete man.

Babu! Look at it this way. You know all these things, but your attitude is different. Nothing will come of the clash of contradictory forces through such individual attitudes, except the ruin of mankind. Cultivate a social stance and look ahead. Learn to see society as a whole, not in bits.

It is true there are different classes in society, and the conflict between these classes helps in social transformation. But then these classes are not autonomous entities but are dependant on one another. Babu! Do not forget their being together itself is society. Now you have to take the next step. Proceed boldly. Be happy, make your family happy.

Grandfather Ramayya concluded.

Sitarama Rao did not speak. For a second he looked at Grandfather Ramayya from head to toe and then turned his gaze to the bridge. A mala stepped aside on the bridge to give way to ashram inmates. A couple of students coming across

teased them. The ashram inmates forgot their calling and raised their staffs. The students ran away laughing.

Sitarama Rao kept looking at the bridge. Gradually the place became deserted. The bridge appeared desolate, a curved half-moon, an endless tunnel.

Grandfather Ramayya sat looking at Sitarama Rao.

Silence, silence, endless silence. To Grandfather Ramayya, Sitarama Rao seemed a part of the silence, silence itself.

"Babu, let's go home now."

Sitarama Rao slowly turned toward Grandfather Ramayya, looked at him strangely, bent his head saying, "You go, Grandfather!"

"Let's both go, babu!"

"Let me stay here for a while, Grandfather. All this silence in the world, let me assimilate it."

Whatever he might have thought, Grandfather Ramayya got up and walked away slowly.

Sitarama Rao turned in the direction of the bridge and sat still, like silence personified. He was looking at the curved half-moon, the endless tunnel. Tears dropped from his eyes.

As if to assert his faith, suddenly he stood up and shouted, "Illusion! Illusion! All is illusion!" Shattering the silence, he screamed, "It can be twisted in any way because it is all an illusion."

It was dark. One could not distinguish between the babool wastelands and the enadi huts; they looked like distant lines of mountains, like dark clouds... Sitarama Rao dragged himself to the cremation ground. He looked at the place. A funeral pyre was burning. He heaved a sigh and sat down.

The restlessness and agony he had been suffering since the morning abated. The darkness, the cremation ground and the funeral pyre gave him peace. Perhaps, the cremation ground was what he had been looking for all these days, he thought. He looked at the funeral pyre intensely.

Someone came near him and asked, "What I have done, is it wrong?"

Sitarama Rao was startled. He looked at the person. He seemed a sixty year old man, his body wasted.

"Tell me, nayana, is it wrong, what I have done?"

"Who can tell what is wrong? Each his own witness," said Sitarama Rao.

"That's it. You have uttered the truth. May you live for a hundred years! They'll say anything, they are not aware of the circumstances. They'll call it wrong, sin, evil. Men have first of all to live. Morality, duty, scripture – they are all for those who can live. For those who find it hard to live, living is morality, living is duty, living is scripture."

"It does seem so. Living has become an inescapable addiction of mankind. Why live? They do not have the courage to ask themselves ..."

"Then what's wrong in fulfilling that need?"

"Seems nothing wrong. Everyone is doing it. They tell lies, they cheat, they torment. Everyone fends for himself ruthlessly."

"Then what sin have I committed? Babu, food became hard to find. Who knows how many days we slept on empty stomachs and cried in starvation? One day, my daughter brought ten rupees and put them in my hand. "Where did you get them?" I asked. She told me. She did not hide anything. She told me everything. I lost my temper. Know how I beat her up? I broke her bones. But, to what purpose? From the next day it was again the same story. I could not do anything. She earned and supported the family. Her brother educated himself with her earnings and has now taken up a job. What more could one wish for? The few days she lived, she lived happily and made us happy. She has gone her way. Look there. She is mingling with the earth. May you live for a hundred years!" the old man blessed him and went away.

Sitarama Rao kept thinking. Many thoughts raged in his mind. The world looked different to him, the world that came recently within his experience was strange to him. Presently, he had no strength even to suffer. He sat there like a lifeless figure.

As he compared the noisy world with the quiet cremation ground, his mind cooled. He felt as if he had come to the right place, to his motherland, to his home. Here there were

no disputes, no quarrels, no high and low, no society, no deceit, no conspiracy, no worry. Here all were equal. Coolies, merchants, men, women, children, adults, righteous, adulterous – all equal. A cremation ground had no preferences, it treated all alike. His father and aunt were here. His mother was here ... Grandfather Ramayya spoke so glibly, preached morals, but he too would have to come here. His own uncle had amassed wealth by cheating him, but could he avoid coming here? He too would have to leave his property behind and come here empty-handed. Then why all this hankering?

Why were some proud of their intellect, others of their wealth? Some distressed by their poverty, others by their dense minds?

As he thought so, the cremation ground looked attractive to him, looked like Mother Incarnate, Goddess Earth, who bore on her back the joys and sorrows of the whole world.

The pyre in the distance burned high, flames leapt as if to burn up the whole world, rattling and crackling. He felt the pyre was inviting him, eager to tell him some secret. Poor thing! The pyre had no legs to walk to him! No mouth to cajole him! It was sending flames in his direction, and then withdrawing them. He was reminded of the ocean waves in tide. He felt the pyre was beckoning him. Slowly, he rose and went near it. The pyre seemed to have taken the form of the old man's daughter. The pyre flapped and fluttered. He felt she was saying something. "Happily have I spent my life. What

is left behind in the world is joy and sorrow. All of them, the happy and the unhappy, mingle with the soil. Then why be unhappy? What for?" she asked.

He sat by the pyre listening, wide-eyed. She went on, "Look, here, in this samadhi[22] is an upright woman. She had set for herself a righteous path, she could not fulfil her desires, she rotted and rotted and then died. Did her righteousness make her happy? Of what avail the sufferings she had borne and the troubles?"

The adjacent samadhi moved, as if sobbing.

He gave another look to the cremation ground. The whole place seemed to be on the move. Hillocks moved, darkness swung. He knew where his father was cremated. Picking his way among the mounds, he went there. There was nothing, the mound had disappeared and the ground was flat. Calitropis shrubs grew densely there. He felt his father had become the manure for these shrubs. His father, his hero, who had been responsible for many great deeds, his father to have become manure for these shrubs! Would his father stoop so low, dead though he was! He was angry with his father. His father had been responsible for his birth. His father was responsible for the birth of these shrubs! As long as he was alive, his father nurtured him. After death, his father nurtured these shrubs!

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22. Besides the two meanings given in the COD – a state of concentration induced by meditation; a state into which a perfected holy man is said to pass at his apparent death – there is a third meaning in which it is used here, the place of cremation with or without a commemorative stone or structure.

Unless there was something wrong with his blood or thinking, would his father be responsible for the birth of these Calitropis shrubs? Instead of these Calitropis shrubs, couldn't rose bushes have risen? Or jasmine? Instead of him, couldn't some great man have been his father's son?

One of the bigger shrubs moved and called out to him, "Brother!" He was startled. The shrub's shadow moved and heaved at the heat of the pyre nearby. His father looked at him viciously, rolling his eyes, gnashing his teeth, and said, "Is this what you have done! I had such high hopes for you! In the end, this is what you have done? My honour, my family prestige, my ancestral glory, you have dragged them all into dust!"

Sitarama Rao grew angry and said, "Money is finished, father – what can I do?"

"Money, money, money, always money! When you were born I knew you were taking after your maternal uncle. What if there was no money? Ruined and lived or lived and ruined? ask the elders. You gave up the traditions we had maintained for generations. In spite of all I taught you, your mother has been your ideal?"

At the mention of his mother, Sitarama Rao grew more angry. The respect and affection he had had for his father was lost with that one word. He felt as though a big load had been taken off his chest. "What do you say? What were the traditions amassed and hoarded in your family that had been there in

you? What honour was there in your ancestry that was not in my mother's? Everyone has his self-respect. Have you ever considered how many have been crushed and are being crushed in the oil mill of your family honour? Your family and your traditions have brought me to my present state. I am sinking, sinking below the earth. This pit doesn't seem to have a bottom. Till now, whatever my sufferings, I had at least the satisfaction of keeping you happy! Now, even you have begun to abuse me? Am I responsible for my state? Or are you?"

"I am?!" His father was surprised.

"Yes, you are. Certainly you are. I have inherited some of your traits. You have raised me with your own hands, according to your wishes and tastes. My environment was what you had created. Then where was the place for my wishes? I grew as you desired. I thought the thoughts you liked. You had drilled into me that any one who lived differently from your way was vile, wicked, immoral. You had alienated me from my own mother. Now, are you afraid of seeing the result of your own creation? Are you frightened? Shifting the blame to me?"

The father was afraid of the son. He did not know what to think. He could never have even imagined that a son born in his family could ever rebel against his father, could thus abuse his own family. Stunned, he stared at his son. He saw his son's shadow. He thought it was his son. It moved, stood erect and spoke to him. "Nonsense! He is telling lies. He has done all this himself. Now, he is trying to shift the blame to you. He

has always been like this! Shifting his blame to others, harassing others for his failings – this is what he has been doing since your death! You are not responsible for this!"

Sitarama Rao was dumbfounded to see his own shadow speak thus.

The father's face lit up, he said, "Truly you are my son. Come here, my boy!" He embraced his son's shadow. "I thought he was really my son. What anguish he caused me! His words cut up my heart."

"He is like that, father. He has no ideals. One without a goal, one who does not believe in something and work for it, he will come to this pass," the shadow said.

Sitarama Rao lost his temper. He put his foot forward and demanded, "Who are you?"

"I am your father's son."

"Then who am I?"

"You are my shadow."

"What?!"

"What did you think? You are a form without a heart, a skeleton without a form!" the shadow said.

Sitarama Rao was feeling suffocated. Looking into his father's face, he said, "Father … I am your son … Look at me!"

"Go, go away!" His father roared. "Father?! Still you think you can deceive me? Can't I recognise my son? I have raised him with my own hands! Don't I know him! … You, my son!

Haa, haa, haa … Babu, he is a nightmare." So saying to the shadow, his father laughed, and laughing he disappeared with the shadow.

Sitarama Rao slumped. He couldn't understand what was happening to him, his head was splitting.

"Babu!" called out the nearby samadhi. He started and looked up. It was his mother calling. There was no doubt about it. "You have changed, my son!"

"Have I, mother! The change in me gives you joy? Have I been able to make you happy, mother?"

"Yes, son, you are changing!" said the mother. He thought she was shedding tears of joy.

"Mother, I have been able to make one person happy in this wide world, and that too my own mother. What more do I want?"

"I am really happy, my son," said the mother.

"Mother … mother … mother …" he fell at the feet of the samadhi and sobbed. "It's no use mother, it is too late."

He did not know how long he had wept like that, but when he raised his head, the pyre was abating, darkness was thickening. The cremation ground wore its normal look. A black dog was licking his leg. He lay on his back, still, staring at the dog. After a while the dog's form looked like his own.

His own likeness stood in front of him.

He was frightened to see his likeness, face wrinkled, hair

ripe like a reed bush, eyes fiery, body like a skeleton, bent and dangling. Unable to stand, it sat down coughing, holding its stomach.

Sitarama Rao felt as if he himself was coughing; the cough wracked him. After coughing and coughing, the likeness rose like a provoked cobra; standing opposite Sitarama Rao, it hissed: "Fool! You are responsible for my ruin! You have crushed and ruined a golden life with useless thoughts. Who brought me to this pass? Your egoism, your foolishness, your pigheadedness!"

The coughing fit came on again. His likeness slumped into a skewed string cot and went on coughing.

His wife became an old woman. Unmindful of the suffering of his likeness, she was stitching shirts for her grandson. His son came, now a dignified man. None of them noticed the suffering of his likeness in the skewed string cot.

"Babu, water!" asked his likeness.

"Fill up a tumbler and drink," said the son.

"Me, your father! ..." exclaimed his likeness.

"Father! ... Done so well for the family ... So well!" the son expressed disgust. The wife did not restrain him, but she fetched water and gave it to his likeness.

As his likeness was about to drink the water, the coughing fit overtook it. The glass dropped and his likeness was struggling in the string cot, spitting blood. Blood all over. He could not stand the agony of his likeness.

He felt as if himself was coughing, spitting blood, his own nerves twisting and tormenting.

His likeness got up again, and sat holding the edge of the cot. It was looking at him; its gaze burned him, flames surged.

"Why are you sitting again? … Lie down … Our nerves are breaking down waiting on you," said the son.

His wife picked up his grandson and gave the child to his son. The son kissed the child. The mother and son were delighted at the child's pranks.

His likeness was coughing. "See, what you have done! You have estranged me from my own wife and children. They don't give me the child. You know why? Because I'll spoil the child. They are afraid I'll corrupt his mind by telling him all sorts of things … Swine! After all this, you are still alive, shameless, griefless? Why are you living? Who else do you want to ruin? Whose lives to put out?" So saying his likeness rose from the cot and pounced on him.

It was spitting poison; its eyes were burning like torches; swords and spears came out of the eyes and were cutting him into pieces. He begged for help from his wife and son. They did not pay any heed … His wife had served a meal to his son and squatted opposite him, chatting; the son was laughing.

He was angry. There was nobody to help him, none to pity him. Nobody had any sympathy for him. He would defend himself, he would counter-attack, he would fight back. Couldn't he save himself from his own likeness? Couldn't he

vanquish his own likeness? Couldn't he fight?

His likeness had jumped on him. It was kicking him in the belly with its skeletal legs; hitting his face with clenched fists; tearing his flesh with fangs; clawing his body with nail-swords. The cremation ground became a horror with blood, flesh, bones and entrails – vultures flew, jackals howled.

Sitarama Rao clenched his teeth, tightened his fists, concentrated all his energy and suddenly rose. He jumped on his likeness, and held its neck with both hands. He pressed, squeezed, squeezed with all his strength. His likeness was spitting blood. He kept squeezing the neck. The eyes of his likeness fell out, two bloody eggs. He overpowered his likeness and routed it. He was destroying it, he wreaked vengeance, the fiend in him raged. He broke its neck, like a chicken's. With a piercing scream he fell down. He murdered himself.

The next morning the news was all over the town that someone was lying dead in the cremation ground. Crowds gathered. Near the body, blood had dried up. The corpse had no eyes. It had injuries all over, the body torn to pieces, neck twisted. The whole place was in a shambles, as though four or five combatants had fought over there.

"Somebody stabbed and murdered him," concluded one and all.

Until Grandfather Ramayya came and identified the corpse, not even those who had known him well could recognise Sitarama Rao.

Tripuraneni Gopichand (1910-62), novelist, short story writer, editor, essayist, playwright and film director, tried his hand at various jobs but writing remained his first love throughout his life. His later works are remarkable for an interplay of values, ideas and 'isms' - materialism, existentialism, rationalism, realism and humanism - to mention some.

He is celebrated for this, his second novel, *Asamardhuni Jeevayatra,* even though he won the Sahitya Akademi Award 1963 for his last novel, *Pandita Parameswara Sastri Veelunama.*

D. S. Rao, Ph.D., is a former Editor of *Indian Literature*, the Sahitya Akademi's literary and academic bimonthly. He is the author of the research work, *Three Decades*. A literary critic, his writings appeared in several dailies and journals, including *The Indian Express*, *The Times of India, The Hindu, Patriot, Newstime, Link, India Magazine* and *Indian Literature.*

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*Design by : Creative Concept*

This Telugu classic is included in *Masterpieces of Indian Literature*, compiled by the National Book Trust, India. Written shortly before the political decolonisation of India in 1947, when all values were simmering in a cauldron, Gopichand created a unique character : Sitarama Rao jolted the Telugu readers. Heir to a feudal order, the anti-hero is lost in theoretical thinking and cannot cope with the harsh realities around; he goes mad and kills himself. Admirers have compared his madness to that of King Lear and Hamlet; while critics carped on the novel's echoes to Gorki.

This is the first psychological novel in Telugu literature. It is symbolic, selective and representational in treatment, and poses social, political and spiritual issues in a haunting manner.

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